





WANTED—A WIFE

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(IO CERCO MOGLIE)

BY
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AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY
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NICHOLAS L. BROWN
NEW YORK MCMXXII

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING MYSELF!

CAVALIERS Ginetto Sconer, ruddy complexion, physiognomy diffusing intelligence and courage, sound throughout—hair, teeth, physique.

That's me! . . . In this vale of sorrow and of tears it is my privilege to enjoy good health. Even when I was still traveling with the common herd of salesmen, my customers used to tell me: "Signor Sconer, you do great credit to your firm." In point of fact I have always had a most distinguished presence. . . . I keep my weight down to 175 pounds.

And now let us pass on to the moral balance sheet. This is equally in my favor. I have a well-balanced and serene disposition, and I am glad of it, because fortune favors those who are thus endowed. Still it is not true that I am so lacking in sensibility that if I should receive a kick in the latter end of the alphabet—to employ

one of Lionello's vulgar witticisms—my face would betray no signs of emotion.

At all events I am not excitable. Excitable people do not live long. *Achilles, an excitable person, died young.* This sentence is contained in the advertising booklet issued by our house, entitled, *What I Must Do to Prolong My Life.*

The scientific part of the booklet was intrusted to Dr. Pertusius; but the moral part is my own creation.

"It's a fact," Dr. Pertusius observed to me, "that excitable and sensitive individuals are as short-lived as they are unhappy, because they expend too much vital energy.

"In that case let us recommend *Vitaline*," said I.

"But there's no such thing as *Vitaline*!" said the doctor.

"That makes no difference, we will create it: *Vitaline*, elixir of life, a product of our House."

"That's just bluff," said the doctor.

"What of it? Bluff has a right to exist so long as anybody exists who will let himself be bluffed."

The doctor had written: "Avoid all mental troubles!" and I added, "When trouble approaches you along the right hand path, there is no plausible reason why you should not choose to follow the path to the left."

“But you,” said the doctor,” are thinking only of your own precious carcass!”

I was amazed at his ironic tone.

“One owes oneself that duty, my dear doctor.”

One of my lady customers used to tell me that the price of my *Ideal Violet* was rather high.

“My dear lady,” I replied, “if I sold it cheaper perhaps I might make more money; but ladies of fashion, like yourself, would desert my shop; and if I confessed that it is called *Ideal* because it is not made of real violets, but of coal-tar, I wonder if you would understand?”

“You are not very honest!” said the lady.

“Is it any more honest for an aged hen to try and masquerade as a spring chicken?”

That was the answer I should have made her if I had not been a gentleman. Ah, yes! I am almost too scrupulous; and when I think of certain financial giants, I cannot resist telling myself: “It’s true, Ginetto, you are not quite at the top notch, but you are a perfect gentleman,” and that is always something to be proud of.

And when I think that twenty years ago I started in business without a centime to my name, and that to-day I am the head of the firm of X . . . & Co., Ltd., and one of the Board of Directors of the Y . . . Manufacturing Co., and in such capacity exert considerable personal influence in financial matters, I cannot resist

telling myself, "Ginetto, you are a great man!"

Thanks to a lucky bargain, I recently became owner of a dwelling in rococo style situated in one of the most modern quarters of the city. The two upper floors are rented to quiet and select tenants. The ground floor and adjoining garden are reserved for myself. I have polished floors, a dining-room Renaissance style, a parlor Louis Quinze style, a bed-room Empire style, with a mahogany bed, and an adjoining dressing-room Liberty style. Above the bed hangs a tapestry with a Holy Family designed by a distinguished painter. My housekeeper is named Desdemona. She was for many years in the service of a princely house, and her aspect is somewhat forbidding. Although very reserved, she nevertheless allowed herself to make this observation: "There is many a young lady, Cavaliere, whom you might make very happy!"

"Do you really think so?"

"I really do, Signore."

Regularity is one of my most notable qualities. I leave home at ten o'clock in the morning, scrupulously shaven, and with collar and necktie in perfect order, because this is not only a duty that every distinguished individual owes himself, but it is also a necessity where one has a large personnel under one's direction. I

transact my business and at night return home to dine in my own house. When I look around and touch my possessions, I enjoy to the full the sensation of really living. I often entertain my friends, Lionello among others, a handsome fellow, blond like myself, and the author of books that are quite popular. He said to me the other day:

“I don’t understand it: I am one of the few men of genius remaining in Italy; and yet I never have a thousand lire to spare.”

“Look here,” I answered, “You and I are both artists, and we both have an exact estimate of our public: you give them your books; I give them my products. We both make money: but the money obeys one of its laws, that is, it escapes from some people. . . .”

“Like me,” said Lionello.

“Precisely; and it takes refuge with other people favored by fate.”

“Like you,” said Lionello.

“Precisely,” said I.

“Let us change places,” said Lionello.

“It can’t be done, because that would mean that you would have to pass into my skin and I into yours. You were born to spend and I to save. But you are much luckier than your poor Ginetto, because when you are dead you

will leave your name inscribed upon the immortal tablets of glory; but as for me, to whom shall I leave my capital?"

"Leave it to me," said Lionello.

"Well, why not, my friend? I am sure that no one could spend it more agreeably than you. But it is impossible, because you, Lionello, will die first, since you consume too much vital energy. I, on the contrary, am destined to live at least to the age of ninety-nine; and to save, save, save continually, in accordance with the will of the Lord."

CHAPTER II

TWO CONFLICTING PROBLEMS

YES, in all probability I shall hang on to the age of ninety-nine years, the limit set by Dr. Pertusius for men who are well balanced and serene, and also the limit prescribed by Moses for the men who are just. After that it may happen that I shall die, although there are certain things which I must see before I believe them. But granting this, they will give me a splendid funeral. But afterwards? Afterwards, nobody knows what happens next; and that is precisely why I keep my moral balance sheet in perfect order. But it is certain that if I, Ginetto Sconer, had an heir who took after me, with a nose like mine, with eyes like mine, with a heart like mine, that is, well balanced and serene, I should come back to live for a second time in my heir; and from my tomb I should hear the consoling words: "What an excellent man my father was, for he has enabled me to live as comfortably as a bug in a rug!" But in order to have an heir, I must have a son, and to that end I must acquire a wife. Yes,

I know, my brilliant qualities have made me much sought after, and not a few people have repeated what my housekeeper said: "You could have, you still could, you still can make many a young lady happy." All the same, I never altogether liked the sound of that word *matrimony*. I remember that Lionello has frequently assured me that the cases of conjugal fidelity definitely proven, as he himself had cause to deplore (his own word, "deplore"), were very few. That is disquieting, not because of tragic consequences, which I should avoid at any cost, but because it might throw doubt upon the authenticity of my heir.

But now, since Lionello has acquired more advanced ideas, he scornfully heaps abuse upon me because I am thinking of marrying at all.

"But, my dear fellow," I answered, "you, being the artist that you are, find it profitable to lead, so to speak, a disorderly life. But I, if only for the sake of my business, am a man of order; and matrimony is as much a social convention as, on certain occasions a frock coat and a top hat. Besides, I want a son."

"Sons belong to humanity at large," said Lionello.

"That is all right for you," I rejoined, who count yourself a part of humanity at large. But I want a son of my own."

I might also have remarked that he showed no little ingratitude towards matrimony, because it had given him some fine triangular situations for his plots, but out of delicacy I refrained from mentioning this.

For some time past, the problem of an heir has been further complicated by the impressive phenomenon of a renaissance of my youth. I, who up to a few years ago, could come and go tranquilly, am now seriously perturbed. I stop to look at the pretty girls! How many there are of them! I never used to realize there were so many! Even the girls of the people, who walk the streets with a tango step, swinging a shopping-bag, with its contents of a little mirror, a powder puff, a little parcel of sausage—I like even them! It is very strange!

These dear girls translate themselves into sensations of dessert: cream of swirling skirts, apricot ices with strawberry lips, rum punches with dancing slippers that set my head to whirling. Oh, bewitching little guttersnipes, why will you peck at my poor tender heart? There are certain little heads so daintily poised that it would be a delight to wring them off and use them for wall decorations for my sitting-room. But alas, although in business affairs I am magnificently venturesome, when I find myself a

guest at the feast of beauty, I become shamefully prudent.

Elementary common sense makes me exclude shop-girls, stenographers, telephone operators and other young women of that class from my list of matrimonial possibilities; but I confess that they have given me many anxious hours.

. . . Even the homely ones, by the time I have seen them twice, begin to look pretty.

Since I have a Bechstein piano in my sitting room, I decided to take some piano lessons. At the first lesson my music teacher struck me as uninteresting, at the second she became noticeable, at the third, alluring, at the fourth positively dangerous. In view of the fact that the lady had a most evil looking husband, I said to myself, "Ginetto, safety first!" and I handed the lady an envelope containing payment in full for her services. But every time that I play upon my Bechstein, presto! I see the music teacher, and a whole bevy of pretty girls flitting across my ceiling, and gazing down at me with their big, china-blue eyes.

Disturbed by this excessive sensibility I consulted Dr. Pertusius about it. All he said about it was:

"That is a symptom of the dangerous age."

"Deuce take you, Doctor! Do men have a dangerous age?"

"Of course they do," said the doctor.

There was something that I didn't know. Now that I think of it, my ship of life crossed the latitude of my thirtieth year some time ago, and has been steering toward the fortieth, but has not yet reached that parallel.

"Tell me, Doctor, is the dangerous age really dangerous?"

"Decidedly so, since it shifts the burden from the automatic portions of the human machinery to the noble organ of the brain."

Taking advantage of my friendly relations with Dr. Pertusius, I confided to him that the sight of certain sentimental little heads supported on slender throats left bare by the prevailing low-necked fashion, filled me with a desire to chop them off.

"A symptom for which we doctors have a special name," said Pertusius.

"Is it a serious symptom?" I asked.

"No, not so long as you don't chop their heads off, but there have been cases where they did chop them off!"

"Why is it, Doctor," I asked, "that the sight of rosy shoulders tinged with pale olive, revealed by a low-cut gown, gives me strange little thrills?"

"Make believe," advised the doctor, "that you are looking at the under side of a lizard!"

"I get you," said I, "But it can't be done!"

"Very true," he said gravely.

"And at your age, Doctor, does it never happen to you?"

"We needn't go into that," said he.

I regard doctors with a sort of indulgent mistrust, because their everlasting study of maladies has ended by making them regard even health itself as just another form of disease.

At all events, it is quite clear that even as a matter of physical well-being I must get married. I must find a wife, both for my own sake and for the sake of an heir.

Here is a list of eligible young women—of good social standing, naturally—that I have jotted down in my pocket note-book as matrimonial possibilities.

CHAPTER III

MATRIMONIAL LIST

SIGNORINA A. : Satisfactory dowry, fine presence, distinguished family, conjectural weight, 150 pounds. Very attractive to-day but her father is enormously stout; her mother, ditto. Hereditary tendency to obesity. Rejected for æsthetic reasons.

Signorina B.: Too many school diplomas. She knows all the dates by heart. Her prominent forehead betrays her intelligence. She is all the time saying: "I was born to be a writer." After marriage, she is quite capable of writing me up for the papers! Ah, no! Too much forehead, and not nearly enough hair.

Signorina C.: She is forever asking, "Do I look all right? And the moment you look at her, she says: "Why are you staring at me? It isn't nice to stare!" She laughs at nothing at all. Another woman asked her where she could get such well-fitting corsets as hers. "I don't wear corsets," she answered, "I am pretty

enough just as I am." At a lecture, she did nothing but ridicule another woman who wore yellow shoes. "Making such a show of her feet, when they are big as flower-pots, and with rubber heels besides!"

When she is out walking, she casts side-glances into every window. "Mamma, does my dress hang all right? Does it hang wrong? Is it straight? Is it crooked? "Yes, darling!" But what mamma doesn't see and I do, is that daughter is a silly little fool. And my heir has got to be intelligent.

Signorina D.: A charming girl; but too generous hearted toward all men who flock about her. Her excessive kindness is responsible for her having been sent away from one school after another. A dear girl, but she offers the disadvantage that while the heir would be legally my son, he would not necessarily resemble Ginetto Sconer.

Signorina E.: Curly headed, slender, almost too thin, nicknamed "Peach Blossom." Signorina B., the one "born to be a writer," sent word to her that "Pumpkin Blossom would be a more appropriate name. Peach Blossom retorted, "walking dictionary!" The young woman born

to be a writer rejoined, "Broomstick in skirts!" To which Peach Blossom replied, "Broomstick in skirts, if you like, but a female broomstick, which is more than you will ever be! And, what is more, a full bust measure has gone out of fashion." Signorina E. possessed an excessive readiness of tongue that gives me food for thought. What is more, she wants to know if I snore. "All husbands snore. Mamma says so."

Signorina F. : As beautiful as a head by Murillo; but what advantage is that when she can never say anything but, "Oh yes! . . . Wait a minute! . . . Why, the idea!"

I don't know that painter Murillo, but he must have painted heavenly pictures, for she is always up in the clouds.

"Signorina, what do you like best? Reading, working, cooking?"

"I just love housework!" But her own room would horrify my housekeeper Desdemona. The only housework she does is to polish her nails, and when no one is looking wave her hand in the air to make the blood run out of it.

"Signorina, what are you reading? The latest news of the war?"

Not at all; she was reading the personal column.

Signorina G. : “Soars upward in a slender, flawless shaft,” as Lionello says, but she makes the mistake of going around accompanied by her mother, who perhaps once on a time was another slender, flawless shaft, but to-day is bent into an arch. A clever girl ought to avoid being seen with a mother who offers a prophetic picture of what she herself is destined to become. Besides, the son of Ginetto Sconer must be a rugged oak, and not a slender shaft.

Signorina H. : Daughter of an architectural engineer, and a very graceful specimen of her father’s structural work, done in my favorite style, *Louis Quinze*. She looks like a big doll, and her name is Noemi. She wears corkscrew curls like those you see in old prints. She affects great languidness and a soft, drawling voice. But appearances are deceitful. I overheard her one day, in her father’s office, raising the rents of all his tenants. That young woman, I said to myself, has some good qualities! But another day I heard a strident voice loud enough to raise the roof: “Get a move on! Get a move on! Patience isn’t my middle name, you know! You’re a fool, an idiot! Here goes my slipper straight in your mummy face!” “Bing!” “Ouch!” It was Noemi, soft gentle

name, talking to her maid. That young woman impresses me as dangerous.

Signorina J.: Daughter of a friend of mine, a wealthy manufacturer. We stayed at the same hotel in Viareggio for something more than a week. I don't know what she would be like in winter; but she is fine in summer time. She is so cool and breezy that she makes you feel as if you were sitting next to a water-ice.

She is rather absent-minded. "Signorina, does this belong to you?" The chamber maid, the porter, the bell-boy, were constantly asking her, "Signorina, does this belong to you?" Whenever she arose, she left something behind her, gloves, parasol, picture postcards. I rescued a lace handkerchief every time we went out walking together.

"Clara, can't you be a little more careful?" her mother would say.

"It doesn't matter, Mamma," she would answer. It doesn't matter Signor Sconer, does it? It is so nice not to bother about remembering things. What if things do get lost? It's up to papa!"

"Yes, she is a little thoughtless," mamma confided to me, "but she is so good-hearted, that little girl of mine, and she is always going to be so happy! For she will never remember

to-morrow what happened to-day.” At all events she was a sufficiently charming companion to make a man forget everything else, aside from herself. She went so far as to promise solemnly that she would remember me. But one day, when I was talking of my acquaintances, I happened to mention that I knew Lionello, after which she never left me in peace. “Really? You know Lionello, the one who writes those delightfully sentimental novels? How delightful! What is he like? Is it true that he is quite young, and that he wears his hair cut Russian style, like Gorki? Is it true that he is very romantic? Write to him! Yes, yes, write and tell him that he must come to Viareggio. I promise that I will be ever so nice to you if you do.”

To think of her calling those novels of Lionello’s “sentimental!” My housekeeper, Desdemona, read just one of them, and has been scandalized ever since.

Signorina K.: I met her under most favorable conditions, just recovering from a disappointment in love. Her father was still debating harsh measures: “In England or America a man is made to pay heavily for a breach of promise.” Accordingly I tried as tactfully as possible to console the young lady, when she pulled me up short: “What are you driving at?

Are you all afraid that I shall commit suicide in my despair or go into a convent? Not a bit of it! When I get ready I'll find another man, so that's that. One nail drives out another."

"You really think so, my dear girl?"

"Why, of course! A pretty woman can always find plenty of new nails. You yourself, Sconer, for example. If I chose I would have you down on all fours at my feet."

She very nearly used to sit in my lap, because that is what the actress, Clara de los Dolores, often does on the stage. A fascinating young woman, but much too exigent in the conditions she lays down for conjugal liberty, and expects me to agree to. Preposterous!

Signorina L.: Acquaintance formed at the Bristol Hotel. It was at the time of the earthquake in the Abruzzi. Every one was sighing: "How horrible! What fearful loss of life! Little children crushed to death!" Signorina L., seated on a sofa, sighed like the rest; "How horrible! What fearful loss of life! Little children crushed to death!" But even while she was speaking I could see her looking at herself in the mirror, and giving surreptitious little touches to her dress to make the drapery hang right. It reminded me of my housekeeper, Desdemona, when she is getting ready to turn

over a pan of hash. She kept watching herself out of the tail of her eye in the mirror, and trying new effects with the draping, to the accompaniment of: "How horrible! Is it possible? Little children crushed to death!"

She keeps on posing even when she is alone. I asked her why and she replied: "When the stars and the moon look down upon us from the firmament, it is proper that we should assume a dignified attitude."

"I get your idea, but don't they see rather more than they are entitled to?"

"What if they do? Don't you think I am worth looking at?"

This young lady is altogether to æsthetic.

Signorina M. : English by birth, very lady-like, very much admired in the parlors of the hotel at the watering place where she was taking the waters. But who could be making the earthquake that was taking place in a room near my own? And who could be singing those much too merry songs, even if they were in the English language? It turned out to be Miss M. What is more, she used to drink brandy, and danced the latest tango steps with another girl friend. England can't be trusted, even if she is one of the Allies.

This note concerns the young woman who caused me the most suffering of all. I call her Signorina N. Y., standing for New York, because she is the American type. None the less, she is Italian, and belongs to the same distinguished class as I; before the war her father was an exporter of Italian medicines made in Germany, with his main office in New York. Miss N. Y. is wealthy, and thinks that she rules the universe. She is twenty years old, slightly under medium stature, but physically strong. She is the picture of health, and the incarnation of high spirits. She is just the type to give my heir the best chance. Her voice, tinged with Parisian rolling *r*, seems to be perpetually singing the hymn of youth. *Cheep-cheep!* she sings from the branches of the tree of life. Her parents have given her a degree of liberty almost too American. *Cheep-cheep!* I met her once at a fair for the benefit of the Red Cross, where she wheedled a hundred francs even from me. *Cheep-cheep!* I saw her another evening at a futurist lecture. She understood the whole of it, and was enthusiastic. *Cheep-cheep!* I have seen her skating, and cutting patterns like a hieroglyphist. *Cheep-cheep!* I have seen her at the wheel driving an automobile. *Cheep-cheep!* I saw her at the funeral of the banker, Rodh. She sat in front with her mother, and

I behind with her father, and we talked business. Except in unavoidable cases like that of the banker, Rodh, I avoid funerals, because it seems to me that in the presence of the bier everybody turns pallid, and it must be bad for the health. But Miss N. Y. even dressed in black, was resplendent. *Cheep-cheep!* The exuberant creature! Life for her is just a tree on which all she has to do is to change branches—in other words, change her clothes—and sing her hymn: *Cheep-cheep!*

She speaks Italian well, but when she talks to her dog, a highly educated dog, she speaks French.

I once had the honor of entertaining her in my home, because her father and mother wanted to look at the second floor of the house, which was then vacant. On that occasion we were left alone.

“How magnificent,” she said, referring to my dwelling.

“Ah, yes,” I replied. “Formerly the palace of the Counts of Tornamali, but to-day it is my property, Miss N.!”

But she saw an English divan, sprang forward and seated herself on it, bounded up then curled herself up in one corner: “This is so comfortable!” It was the month of May, and she wore a sport hat of white tulle dotted over with big black beads, under the brim of which

one glimpsed her profile with its dainty little nose. Her white frock was partly covered by a sort of embroidered blouse with dragons and serpents in gold and silver. Her pretty arms were covered with long white kid gloves, and her stockings were also white, and were daringly displayed with the little low white slippers. She made me think of some species of oriental squirrel.

Bless my soul, to think of possessing a precious little animal like this for one's very own! If I should stretch out my arms to her, she would leap into them and nestle right down.

As a matter of fact, she suddenly sprang up from her seat and began to *cheep-cheep* again:

"There is one thing you haven't got, Sconer."

"One thing I haven't got?"

"Yes, you have no library."

"So I haven't."

"Make a note of it!"

"I am making a note of it."

She rattled off a list of books in *off* and *eff*.

"Russian writers?" I asked.

"Yes, the Russians are so interesting!" she said. Then she gave me another name which I wasn't able to take down.

"Rabindranath Tagore! A poet without a peer. He makes a little child talk to its mother in a most delicious way."

“And you, Miss N.,” I asked meaningly, “would you be willing to think about making a little child talk in the same delicious way?”

“Think of marrying you mean? Of course. But in Italy marriage offers one serious disadvantage.”

“What is that, Miss N.”

“When a girl marries she settles down.”

“You mean?”

“I mean that she is no longer free, she can no longer run about, no longer flirt or dance or dictate or do as she pleases. I want my liberty! I want to marry in America where one can get a divorce later on and remarry if one chooses to. In Italy matrimony is an institution founded on infidelity. In America it is founded on liberty!”

At that moment, if my business had permitted it, I would have agreed to go to America.

Signorina O.: A terrible young woman, but quite wealthy. Where did she ever learn to roll her eyes like that? The tone of her complexion was prodigious, but not in the least natural; it was transparent! It seemed as though she could not have been born like other women, but must have been sculptured by some magic artist from the pulp of one of those yellow, yellow quinces. She dressed with the most ex-

traordinary taste; she always wore dresses of delicate hues, pale, dubious tints, harmonizing with the tone of her skin. I do not know whether she was really beautiful, for I was more than half bewitched. "Keep that tongue hidden!" I used to tell her, because every few minutes she would stick out the tip of her tongue between her lips; and that at least was not pale, but bright red. "At all events hide those ankles!" Because she had a habit of amply displaying her ankles, as diaphanous as all the rest of her in their almost colorless silk stockings and slippers.

"Do my ankles disturb you?"

"They give me sleepless nights!"

She retorted bluntly: "If you want to marry me, Signor Sconer, seize your opportunity while I am still free."

I would have liked to marry her; but she herself blocked one of the two objects that induced me to consider marriage at all. She refused to have children, "Because it was apt to spoil the complexion." I wanted the lady, but I also wanted an heir. She said, "yes" for her own part but emphatically "no" for the heir. "It is only the peasantry," she declared "who marry to have children."

Furthermore, she exacted as a further condition of marriage, that her husband should exercise for twenty minutes every morning with

forty-pound chest-weights. She is another of the young women who have caused me much suffering.

Signorina P.: Beautiful, or homely according to how she strikes you. I met her during a vacation. She goes everywhere on a bicycle. When she walks she has a rather ungainly gait. None the less she is very charming! She can stick her father's felt hat on her head, she can throw a nun's cloak over her shoulders—as she often does—and still have an air of elegance. She has the sharp little teeth of a lynx, a pointed nose, a pointed chin, and her eyes are like two black dots: And all these various points are so mobile they make one's head swim. She is as pale as wax, but she is never ill. She has long, wavy, riotous hair, which she has to twist like serpents, around and around her head. When unbound it reaches below her knee. The most puzzling thing of all is how she could ever have taken her university degree if she had to sit still in order to study; it is evident that one can get a doctorate without studying.

But when I hear her called "Doctor," it gives me something of a shock. She has a fresh, high-pitched, lilting voice, and one never knows what she means to say, because she never finishes a

sentence. She never loses her temper; at the most, she utters a little cry like a gazelle. What is she going to do? Where is she headed? How will she end up? There is no telling! Yet the girl has brains.

She is not after the men; they are after her. She is more than indifferent, and often audaciously outspoken. But she never forgets that she is a lady!

She is officially betrothed to a young man with money back of him. He follows her around dutifully on a bicycle. She calls him, "Stupid!" "Big Boob!" "Poor Fish!" "Papa's darling!" And it makes him quite happy. She does not strike me as a girl adapted to domesticity, and I told her so in polite terms, in the presence of her betrothed. She replied:

"What's the odds? He'll do the housekeeping."

"I will be her lady's maid," he said in confirmation.

Another day when I met her again, in company with the young man, in a lonely path in the woods, I asked her:

"Speaking frankly, aren't you running a risk spending whole days in the woods alone with this young man?"

"He is as harmless as a glass of water," she

replied. "I have promised to give him a kiss some day next week. Isn't it true, Stupid, that I promised you a kiss for next week?"

Her fiancé replied, "How angry the God of Love must be at seeing how much you make me suffer!"

"You deserve even more than you get," she said.

Her fiancé replied, "It is really quite true, as Cavaliere Sconer says, that you never were intended for marriage!"

"It's you rather than I who aren't meant for it," she answered. And she said to me privately: "How can I ever bring myself to marry such a timid man? The fact is, that the young men of the present day are impossible! They are all so painfully reformed. Tell me, Sconer, how long must I be faithful to a man like that? But what's the use? I am naturally a decent sort of girl, and I never could go wrong with my eyes open."

I could have taken that fiancé's place without risk of unpleasant complications. And yet I too turned out to be the timid sort. Why? Perhaps it was that title of "Doctor" that made me hesitate.

Signorina Q.: A queer type, and so is her mother.

“Signor Sconer,” the mother said, “look!”

“At what?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you! But can’t you see for yourself?”

“No!”

“Don’t you see my little girl’s eyes? How they shine! I don’t know—it is very strange—but as soon as we come to a new place, within a fortnight my little girl is proclaimed the prettiest girl there.”

Beyond question she is very charming. A dashing personality, with lots of style. But why does the mother call her, “my beautiful odalisque.” Where did she find that word? And whatever does she think it means? “Signor Sconer,” the mother says, “did you see?”

“See what?”

“A war aeroplane.”

“That’s nothing unusual!”

“Yes, I know—but—” very mysteriously and with half-closed eyes: “There is one thing that you haven’t noticed!”

“What is that?”

“That whenever an aviator passes by, he always flies low down. Do you know why? In order to see my beautiful odalisque!”

The daughter talks the same way. She says: “I don’t understand— Isn’t it strange! I no sooner come to a place than every one says I

am the prettiest girl there. They say that I look like Lyda Borelli—that's what they say!" She describes her trousseau, the length and width of the lingerie, the lace trimmings of real valenciennes; she describes the gowns made by the famous Abeille, the leading dress-maker of Turin, who has so many high-class mannequins, who also give French lessons. She had all her dresses made in Egyptian style! "Everything Egyptian is the height of style just now," she says. And after all, she can't wear them, because she has joined the Red Cross.

"If you could only see, Signor Sconer," her mother says, "how becoming the Red Cross uniform is to her! When she goes through a hospital ward, the wounded all sit straight up!" But the other Red Cross nurses treated her outrageously. She had to be sent to one of the receiving stations. At the station she carried water to a whole trainful of Austrian prisoners. Her mother says that she did this because she is so tender-hearted. But the other women say that it was because she didn't know they were Austrians. Her fiancé was killed in the war, and she wears a locket with his portrait on her breast. Furthermore, she is very patriotic.

"One day," her mother narrates, "When we were at five o'clock tea, with a number of distinguished people, a procession of socialists

marched by. My little girl went to the window and waved a red, white and green handkerchief, crying, 'Long live Italy!' It was a crucial moment for us all, and almost precipitated a revolution!" The other ladies, on the contrary, insist that she mistook the socialist procession for a patriotic celebration. Now that her fiancé of record, so to speak, is dead, she has a host of others. "How about this one? Or that one? Or the other? Does he come of a distinguished family? Do you think, Signor Sconer," mother and daughter both asked me in one breath, "that he really and truly comes of a distinguished family?" I myself passed for twenty-four hours as her fiancé of record. A very serious matter, let me tell you! Because, even if she does entertain you by describing her lingerie with the valenciennes laces, it ceases to be a joke when she goes on to tell you that she has a brother that can "act like a gentleman or a tramp, according to circumstances, and looks like Maciste, the moving-picture star."

"Where is this brother of yours?" I asked with some concern.

"At the front."

A clever lad! No sooner had the war broken out than his commercial instinct had prompted him to go to the front and buy up—what they probably gave him for nothing—the hides of all

the cattle that died in the fields or were slaughtered for the soldiers. His father was a shoemaker—so it is easy to understand how they now have one of the largest boot and shoe establishments in Italy.

The history of this brother who looks like the movie star has greatly cooled my ardor.

Signorina R.: She is not a patriot, but a pianist.

“I am super-sensitive,” she says; and her mother also says, “Mary, poor child, is super-sensitive!” “We artists,” says Mary, “are a race apart. What is the war to me? What is it to me who commands and who is commanded? What have I in common with Salandra, who declared war? What have I in common with the Kaiser? Then why try to draw me into their quarrels? The Kaiser and the King of the Hottentots are one and the same to me.”

She plays Moskowski, Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel. Did I say “plays”? She would like to play but she can’t. She extends over the keyboard (to borrow her own words), *her long slim hands with nails of polished onyx*, and then strange things happen, as I myself saw one day when they came to try my Bechstein. She began, and suddenly, almost at once, she turned pale. “See how white she has grown,” the

mother said, "it is always like that! Oh, it is terrible! She is going into a trance." "A little brandy!" I suggested. She partly recovered and said: "When I play my veins empty, dreams overpower me, my hair slips unbound over my shoulders like the serpents of the fabled Medusa. Ravel's music, which I adore, exasperates my sensibility like a piercing auger; the instant that I touch the keys I feel the magnetism." Here again, as regards my heir, there is simply nothing doing. And besides such exaggerated sensibility is not without its dangers.

Signorina S.: Her favorite perfume is *Trèfle Incarnat*; even I could recognize it. She is a sort of young girl prodigy, on the analogy of so-called infant prodigies. According to others she is a sort of young girl Sphinx. Lionello, however, who insists that only imbeciles believe in a female Sphinx, calls her the "multi-form Proteus." She is under medium size, with sharp features that project like the muzzle of a young rat, and her small blue eyes are hard and slightly crossed. She dresses and does her hair with a severity that is almost conventional; but the minute she gets upon her feet she is all elasticity, and does certain strange and nimble ritualistic dances that make you shudder, and set you to studying history anew, because they

are the dances of Salome, of Cleopatra, of Sybil, of St. Theresa. She is very young, but her voice has certain deep inflections like the voice of a mature woman, when she is meeting some argument, perhaps some point of philosophy with men who understand it. On the other hand, if she is in the mood, she can imitate the gesture and voice of any one: in dialect, in French and even in German, depending on who it is. It is enough that she has seen them just once. She has even imitated me! This is her comic side; but she has also a tragic side, because she recites certain verses in French about Pelléas and Mélisande in a way that thrills one with terror. If this young woman should go upon the stage she would reap a harvest of golden glory. But there is no question of that sort of thing. She has no higher desire than to be the *willing slave of the right man, and live in a cottage*. But there is one condition: the right man must be a *magnificent lover*! There are plenty of candidates, but not one of them is *magnificent*. What she wants for a lover is a *cave man*, a *Ulysses of the great conquering arm*. So far she has not found him. Meanwhile, one college student has killed himself for her sake; one staid married man with wife and children has gone mad; and an artillery captain went back to the front with his head so

addled that instead of firing on the Austrians he massacred some of our own troops; after which he disappeared.

As for me, I beat a retreat.

But here is an advertisement in a German paper that offers me an heir already made.

“Christliches, Einziges Glück! Sehr nettes, ehrliches Mädchen, mit einem Kinde und sehr reicher Aussteuer, sucht einen ehrlichen Gatten.”

Which means: “Christian family, rare opportunity! Nice, respectable girl with one child and a fine trousseau, wants a steady reliable husband.” That is the German method of dumping.

CHAPTER IV

FRÄULEIN VIOLETTA

“**L**IONELLO,” said I one day, “among all those marvellous heroines of yours that you persist in killing off, isn’t there a single one you could spare that would do for me?”

In his novels Lionello has all his women die a romantic death. His fair readers write to him from all parts of the country: “Don’t let her die, do save her! She is so dear, so lovely. She mustn’t die.”

But he is inexorable; in one way or another he kills them all.

“Don’t be an ass!” was the way Lionello met my request.

I begged him to explain himself.

“My heroines,” he said, “are either killed or kill themselves because my public demands it. My public is no cleaner minded than you are; but it is strong on moral lessons. It seems incredible, but that’s how it is! Now even you can quite understand that no one can make dramas or romances out of moral lessons! Only, when I make my heroines die I have puri-

fied them, and there is your moral lesson already made. It's the same as when you take rancid fats to make your dainty soaps. But in real life my heroines enjoy the best of health, you can be sure of that!"

"In that case spare me one of them."

"Impossible!" replied Lionello.

"Why so?"

"Because no one of my heroines could ever possibly love you."

"Why do you say that, Lionello? Why mark me down so low? Come, I'm not such a scarecrow as all that!"

"No, my dear fellow. On the contrary, you are quite a likable chap; but you aren't the type, you see, of the man of destiny—the lean, Mephistophelic type that turns a woman's head like a glass of champagne, that takes her by storm, that makes her say: 'Base deceiver, come to my arms!' "

"And you are that type?"

"Of course."

"You are a genius, Lionello," I said sadly.

"I know it. You haven't even to your credit any of those exploits that fascinate women: such as, a crime of passion, an æsthetic scandal; you were never caught in a raid. you've never taken any sort of a prize; you don't even possess any of those physical anomalies that make a man al-

luring.—For example, that fellow who sells papers on the Corso, who is a dwarf; all the *cottes* pet him, and the house maids quarrel over him. What is worse, you possess the most serious of all defects for obtaining unconditional surrenders.”

“And that is?”

“My friend, pretty women love generous men!”

“Well, at least, I am generous.”

“You may think you are: but you calculate, you stop to consider. Do you suppose that a pretty woman who would steal the stars out of Heaven to make herself prettier, could love you—a man who calculates? They are capable of surrendering their all; but only to the man who proves himself capable of surrendering his all, not merely his wealth, but life and honor. But you, who cling so tenaciously to life, you who could not sleep at night if you had lost a few thousand at *baccarat*, you who keep a well-balanced ledger of giving and receiving, you who live by a scale of exchange rates—no, I couldn’t let you have a single one of the heroines of my novels.”

“You crush me, Lionello. But I fear that you have formed a very unfair estimate of me; you think that I am avaricious!”

“A bit close-fisted.”

“No, Lionello, I told you I was tempted to make you my sole heir. But you see, the fact is that I was born as I am, orderly, methodical, far-sighted. And how am I to blame if money insists upon rolling into the pockets of methodical, orderly, far-sighted men? It is all very fine you know, to read in your novels of the mad, fantastic lives of your spendthrift heroines; I realize that they are capable of giving great satisfaction. They even perturb my own senses. I should find them, no doubt, a pleasant experience. But then I cast up the balance, and become aware of the debit side. To me, squandering money would be one form of suicide. You see that Ginetto Sconer is sincere. Don’t you think so, Lionello?”

But a couple of days after this conversation Lionello precipitated himself like a projectile into my office.

“Sconer,” he said, “an exceptional chance, a most extraordinary chance, the very thing in every way for you!”

I thought that he was talking of some business matter, because at that hour of the day (it was about three o’clock in the afternoon!) I am absorbed in business. But, no! He was talking of marriage. I was obliged to ring off—so to speak—from my brain’s central, before I

could establish connection with Lionello. He became impatient; but I begged him to make himself at home.

"Sconer," Lionello began once more, "do you know who is the most beautiful woman in the world? Please take notice that the question has been settled by popular edict! It is Nicoletta, better known under her stage name of Fräulein Violetta, because it was in Vienna that she scored her first big triumphs."

In response to Lionello, I said: "I have never seen Fräulein Violetta in the flesh; I have only seen her in the movies, and the chief impression that haggard face of hers left on me was that of a woman suffering from chronic seasickness."

"How bourgeois you always are in your expressions," said Lionello scornfully. "Fräulein Violetta sacrifices her beauty to the canons of her art!" Then he resumed: "Do you know Fräulein Violetta's history? No? Then I will tell it to you. Fräulein Violetta is the product of the lyric stage: she comes from the fountain source of Viennese operetta. Slender limbs, tapering waist, opaline complexion, delicate features, calm temperament, but inclined to tease and banter. But her black hair, thick and coarse as the tail of a battle-horse, bears testimony to the psychic energy that is hidden beneath that apparent delicacy. Speaking artistically, she is

an exceptional creature, as we writers say. She is one of the most exuberant temperaments that have ever thrilled the soul of a vast crowd, in the rôles of joyous or tragic heroines drawn from her whole vast repertory . . . ”

“Hold on, hold on, Lionello!” (It sounded like a paragraph out of one of his novels.)

“Her voice was flawless,” he continued, “capable of every known inflection! Well, when she was returning from a tour in America, where she had excited the greatest admiration and consolidated her fame, all of a sudden . . . ”

“She was blown up by a German submarine?”

“Worse than that, my dear friend. She lost her voice. So, she became a moving picture star. She studied the great silent art, and thanks to that perseverance which drives irresistibly towards the goal of glory, thanks to an iron will and to a clear and uncompromising recognition of artistic necessities, she soared on eagle wings toward the lofty heights of tragedy. Do you know, Sconer, how Nicoletta has been defined by a great French writer? *Toutes les femmes dans une femme*, all women embodied in one. Do you know how the poet Flebis has defined her? ‘The universe confined in a Chinchilla cloak,’ because at that time we were in the midst of winter. She is the dynamic woman par excellence! In her are summed up all the count-

less types of femininity, Thais and Salome, Nana and Juliet; she reincarnates all these gifted creatures, vibrating with all the manifold aspects of love, of hatred, of passion and jealousy; she is feline and ethereal, submissive and tempestuous . . . ”

“Lionello, you are starting out on another of your marvelous paragraphs!”

“Do you know how much Nicoletta, that is Fräulein Violetta, earns? More than all the poets of Italy, including Dante.”

“That I can well believe,” said I.

“Yes, because, you see, Fräulein Violetta hides beneath an apparent anarchy a business genius of the first quality, as I can prove to you by the fact that she has been able to maintain her leadership in the face of an enormous competition. Now I must tell you the legend that is circulated regarding her; a legend that savors of absurdity, but is nevertheless true. Tell me, Sconer, have you never seen Fräulein Violetta agonizing in an ecstasy of the senses? Have you never seen *Passion*, interpreted by Fräulein Violetta? Well, Fräulein Violetta is a Vestal Virgin!”

“You mean . . . ”

“I mean one of those ladies of the classic period who, if they were false to their vows, incurred the penalty of being buried alive.”

“A Vestal Virgin?”

“Precisely. Think of it, Sconer, that woman who is responsible for the moral downfall of various generations of young men, is a Vestal Virgin; that is, she is supposed to be, which amounts to the same thing. ‘Are you not ashamed, Fräulein Violetta,’ we asked her, ‘of this legend that is current about you?’ And the poet Flebis, who adheres to the traditional forms of his art, demanded, ‘So you still cling to maidenhood? Your heart still wears a coat-of-mail?’ Fancy, Sconer, a woman so yielding in appearance, and in reality as armor-plated as a *Dreadnought*! We went so far as to tell her it was just an advertising trick. ‘That’s as it may be,’ she replied. ‘It is a form of originality that does you injustice, Fräulein Violetta’—‘You must have the insensibility of stone.’ ‘Do you think so?’ she returned, with an ambiguous smile. But she confided to me, as a brother artist, that she was afraid of spoiling her figure. Besides, it was a great protection. As a Vestal Virgin it was easy to keep all men at arms’ length. You have no idea what a terrible position she is in! She receives as many letters as a reigning sovereign—many of them from men who are evidently quite mad about her. That brings me, Sconer, to something more astounding than the legend: Fräulein Violetta has re-

cently announced her intention of marrying! The announcement gave us all a great shock. At once a full half dozen took the plunge—noblemen, bankers, millionaires. Rejected, every one of them! Then we artists and poets followed suit. With a woman like Fräulein Violetta one can afford to stretch a point. The architect, Santamaria, went so far as to promise to build her a skyscraper in Assyrio-Babylonese style as a landing-place for her flying machine. We too were rejected, very graciously, all the same rejected. ‘Poets, artists, men of genius as a class,’ she said, ‘are my very good friends—but my ideal for a husband is quite different.’ She nearly made an exception for the sake of the poet Flebis, but solely for humanitarian reasons—he is consumptive. ‘So long as you are bound to die any way, dear Flebis,’ she told him, ‘I might as well shorten your painful existence, and let you draw your last expiring breath on my breast. You would be inspired to compose your finest lyric!’ ”

“Is she as brutal as that?”

“Brutality is her specialty. But now, my friend, there is still a third thing more astounding than the Vestal Virgin legend, more astounding than her intention to marry: namely, that Fräulein Violetta’s ideal of a husband is yourself!”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Violetta has vowed that she will marry no one but a thorough-going business man. ‘A mere business man?’ we all exclaimed. ‘Yes, a mere business man,’ Fräulein Violetta retorted, ‘but orderly, well-balanced, and at the same time physically good looking and capable of giving me many children.’ You meet the requirements, don’t you, Sconer? ‘Incredible!’ we all cried in protest. ‘You are proposing said I, ‘to revive the old-fashioned, middle-class Christian family! You want to raise a lot of brats!’ ‘Exactly!’ retorted Fräulein Violetta. ‘But, my dear girl,’ said I ‘that is nothing but snobbishness of a new sort!’ And then I fairly shouted, ‘Nicoletta, if you have really made up your mind, I know the very man you want.’ I had thought of you, Sconer. I rose earlier than usual to-day and, as you see, came straight to your office.”

I was still utterly bewildered.

“Think,” said Lionello, “think of the glory added to your name.”

“I am not a writer,” I replied, “I don’t go in for glory.”

“Then think of the advantage to your firm. You can at once advertise some new perfume or soap called Fräulein Violetta, and it will make you famous.”

“That’s true!”

“And then don’t forget that Violetta is rich, very rich.”

“Yes, but who has supplied her with all this wealth?”

“Certainly not you, base, avaricious soul; but someone capable of worshiping at the shrine of divine beauty. Does anything exist nobler than divine beauty? No! Is there any greater pleasure than that to be derived from a beautiful woman? No! Well then, a beautiful woman is never sufficiently repaid.”

“That’s what you say!”

“That’s what Fräulein Violetta says. You see, she has started a propaganda based on this thesis: that it is time to put an end to the unworthy sterility of mere beauty! It is the same way with genius among us authors: it bears no fruit! Whoever wants it must pay for it! So it is with beauty! Beauty constitutes woman’s genius! Whoever wants it, must pay for it!”

“That’s what you say.”

“That’s what Fräulein Violetta says. But, do you know, even morally she is an extraordinary woman! The ladies of the aristocracy, the women of the wealthy middle-class, permit themselves to enter into cruel competition with the honest working girls of the proletariat, and

they throw divine beauty into the bargain free of charge.”

“But who talks like that?”

“She. *Fräulein Violetta*. I tell you she is the woman of genius! To-day she is the most beautiful woman in the world. That is the popular verdict, and you can imagine how rich *Fraülein Violetta* must be.”

“In that case what has become of her vows?”

“Base soul of a tradesman!” exclaimed Lionello. “Can’t you ever forget that a contract must have a consideration? But don’t you see that when *Fräulein Violetta* exposes her divine beauty on the stage, when she lavishes her priceless smile upon the crowd, she has amply paid? Go ahead and advertise your little flask of *Fräulein Violetta* toilet water, and see what an astounding success you will achieve. And you will have *Fräulein Violetta* herself thrown into the bargain! Come! I will present you to *Fräulein Violetta*.”

“In the flesh?”

“Of course.”

I asked for time to think it over, and went to consult the well known wisdom of Dr. Perthusius.

How wonderful Lionello is! He talks of women as calmly as a horse dealer talks of fillies. And how artistic! When he says

“beauty,” he makes the word sound very, very long, and every hair on his head quivers. I can’t do that.

CHAPTER V

THE REQUISITES FOR A HYGIENIC WIFE

DR. PERTUSIUS is that talented man, discovered by me, who wrote for our firm under my direction, that masterpiece—our advertising booklet—"How to Prolong My Life." But this talent must surely have been thrown out of balance by some unseen influence, for when a man is still poor on reaching the age of gray hair, it is an open question whether or not he possesses real talent.

Wealthy patients are not acquainted with the ninety steps that lead up to Dr. Pertusius' habitation, and my limousine must have been the first automobile that ever stopped before his door.

The doctor's apartment is of such depressing simplicity as to destroy the last lingering respect for the virtue of modesty. There is a diffused odor of fried garlic; and the woman who comes to open the door, uniformed in an ample housekeeper's apron, is in perfect harmony with the apartment and with the odor of fried garlic. I took her for the maid. But I made a bad

break, for she proved to be the Doctor's wife—"my highly esteemed consort." The doctor is a man with his head in habitual disorder. His hair trespasses upon the domain of his beard; his moustache forms two stalactites from his upper lip; his bristling eyebrows defy the efforts of brillantine. A thoroughly lawless head. And to think that it was that head which evolved the chapter on "The Hygiene of the Head!"

This morning Dr. Pertusius' head was even more lawless than usual, because he was occupied with a book which told of a star that is no longer there, although, as he explained, we still perceive its light because it is so immeasurably far off! "Human figures are inadequate to express the distance. Do you not feel, Cavaliere," he asked me, "do you not feel your reason tottering?"

"Not over such things, but if it affects you that way, let's come down from the stars. I called to talk over a fine business proposition. You remember that you compiled for our firm the little treatise "How to Prolong Life?" Well, I want to suggest that you should write another one on an even more agreeable theme, "The Requisites of a Perfect Wife." For this second pamphlet, instead of 200 lire, we would

be willing to pay you as much as 250 lire. Naturally it must be a book with a scientific basis, stimulating, written with verve, as you know how to write it; but over certain matters, *glissons n'appuyons pas!* Our book must be eligible for a place on any drawing-room table."

"But marriage is passing through a Crisis, didn't you know that, Cavaliere?" he asked.

"It is precisely because it is passing through a crisis that we are going to write a *vade mecum* of modern marriage—a rapid, practical, rational *vade mecum*, excluding all the old-time tragedy. Through a crisis? But my dear fellow, a pretty little wife who would dedicate her whole self to her husband's happiness, is one of those institutions that will always work well with or without a crisis."

"So you must have her beautiful besides, Cavaliere? Ah, beauty, beauty," he exclaimed suddenly, "beauty is a terrible thing!" The doctor seemed to bear a grudge against beauty.

"Beauty is divine," I corrected him, quoting Lionello.

"Beauty is terrible, terrible," he repeated. "And yet, what is it? What is beauty? Always the same story: A monkey-face with a little chin, a little nose, a mouth orifice, a little smile, two pupils to right and left of the nose;

the whole supported on a *mannequin* of adipose tissue, against a background of luxuriant hair. One of God's mysteries!"

Frankly, I did not share this opinion. He talks of women as though they were a standardized manufacture, while on the contrary, every woman is a separate piece of craftsmanship.

"Let us leave God's mysteries alone," said I, "or else it will be like a star; we shall never see the end of it."

"How terribly deceptive nature is!" continued Dr. Pertusius. "And yet nature has been almost beneficent in her deceits. What was the beauty of Eve at the time of the creation? Something almost harmless. And so was Adam, almost harmless. In fact, what would Adam's utmost violence amount to while it was limited to his simple, natural energies? A peaceful, gymnastic exercise. Instead of that, Adam invented the sharpened flint, the hatchet, the sword, and later the gattling gun and poison-gas. Woman, I admit, has not created any of these things, any more than she created the pyramids and the electric motor. Such things were created by man. But woman has created woman! She has perfected to an irresistible degree the natural weapon of her beauty. Is this the work of God or of Satan? That is a mystery!

“At what point in time after Eve did woman’s advancement begin? From time immemorial! When Judith prepared to go to the tent of Holofernes to seduce him and then cut off his head, what did she do first of all? She bathed her body, she anointed herself with precious ointments, she parted the hair of her head and placed upon it a mitre—which was the hat of those days—she arrayed herself in her finest raiment, put sandals on her feet, decked herself with bracelets, ear-rings and rings, and appeared in all her incomparable charm. What did the maidens do to find favor with King Ahasuerus? They spent six months whitening their skin with aromatics and precious ointments.”

“That is a very interesting detail!”

“And among all those maidens, why did Esther find special favor with King Ahasuerus? Because she was the most beautiful! The grim Ahasuerus had condemned to death Mordecai, the friend of Esther. But Esther presented herself before the King, and the King was so dazzled by her beauty that he said, ‘What is thy request? It shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.’ And why did Samson, that stupid fool of a Samson, reveal to Delilah the secret of his great strength? Because Delilah made him sleep upon her knees, and pillowed

his head upon her breast, *et in sinu eius reclinare caput*. And who was Delilah? A harlot of those times."

"Let us say, a *demi-mondaine*! But, my dear man, you don't suppose that I can bring myself to present my customers to a homely wife—'guardian of public morals,' so to speak?"

"We must draw a distinction," said he, "between one kind of beauty and another."

"All right, let us draw the distinction."

He bowed his head. Presently he raised it again and inquired:

"What do you know about mushrooms?"

"They are very nice broiled," said I.

"But you must know, Cavaliere, that among the edible mushrooms there grows a fungus called the *Amanita muscaria*, which contains a terrible poison that produces dizziness, hallucinations, incoherence of ideas, stupor and finally death. For what mysterious reason do the dreadful *Amanita muscaria* and the even more dreaded *Amanita phalloides*—note the name!—grow among honest mushrooms? For what mysterious reason does the deadly fungus appear more iridescent and more attractive than other kinds of fungus? There is an enigma that has not yet been solved."

"Let us leave it unsolved," said I.

"Look here."

He opened a drawer and took out a woman's portrait. "Look at this!"

"Very pretty," said I.

It was a charming face, triangular, like a tender heart, gracefully surmounting the curve of a perfect shoulder; mouth like a lily, eyes amazingly wide open.

"I like her very much," I repeated.

"You mustn't," said the doctor. "As long as she lived she was one of the most deadly specimens of the species!"

"Is she dead? Oh, the poor girl?"

"Dead a hundred years. She was Lady Hamilton, otherwise called Emma Lyon."

"Well, if she is dead she is not dangerous."

"Dangerous even though she is dead! An *Amanita phalloides* of the most terrible sort. Do you see, Cavaliere, that ambiguous smile that looks so angelic? That woman produced dizziness and incoherence in many distinguished men; and when she did not destroy their lives, she destroyed their honor."

"Doctor, this is a serious matter; but, forgive me for saying so, you remind me of a 'barker' at a wild beast show: 'Here is the terrible siren of the North Sea that devours corpses alive!' Come, I say! Isn't it perhaps a question of dangerous age with you too?"

The doctor looked at me with malignant eyes.

"And now look at this," he said, producing another portrait.

"What a frightful face!"

It was not a woman's face, but a man's and so ugly that I wouldn't have cared to meet him in the flesh at night.

"Ah, even you recognize him," said the doctor, with much satisfaction. "You have before you the 'congenital delinquent,' the 'epileptiform man!' Do you note the degenerate stigmata? Facial assymetry through the abnormal development of the skull, salient lower jaw . . ."

"He looks," said I, "as though he would like to eat people alive."

"In bygone times, he actually did eat them raw. Profound canine cleft in the upper jaw, excessive protuberance of the supraciliary arches, obliquity of the eye socket. And now, look at the ear, with its adherent lobe, absence of helix, presence of Darwin's tubercle, such as fauns were supposed to have . . ."

Slightly alarmed, I felt of my own ear, and inquired, "Doctor, have I any of these things?"

"No, you are perfectly normal."

"That's what I thought. But, excuse me, what is the purpose of this lecture on delinquents, with all these ugly words?"

"Listen," said the doctor triumphantly, "In the delinquent woman we have the opposite

phenomenon to that of man. The delinquent man bares written on his face, 'I am a delinquent.' In woman, nothing of the sort! Indeed, in the majority of cases the delinquency of woman is hidden behind that mask of fatal beauty against which I just warned you: a beauty frequently enhanced by an intellectual brilliance that closely counterfeits real intelligence. Such women may be either mystics or sensualists: but always heartless, always deceitful! No common, vulgar lying, mark you; but what we doctors call pathological pseudology: that is, such unconscious lying that it sounds like sincerity. This is the type of women famous in the annals of hysterics and of passions, the women who exerted a poisonous influence upon the nervous centers of history, such as Cleopatra . . ."

"I have heard of her."

" . . . such as Semiramis, such as the Empress Catherine of Russia, such as Emma Lyon whom we have before us, such as certain queens of the foot-lights, and so forth and so on. Their characteristic is destruction. Wherever they pass, they blast and burn."

"Isn't it possible, Doctor, that you exaggerate?"

"No, I don't exaggerate. They are female Attilas, with angelic faces, while the male At-

tilas have the faces of beasts of prey. Generally these women blast themselves. But if they last out, all of a sudden you will see them go to pieces, and the mantle of deceptive beauty falls. In its place appears either shapeless corpulence or repulsive leanness; a harsh voice, an irrepressible cynicism in place of intellectuality. And note further this type rarely bears children; and we doctors have learned that maternity alone gives intelligence to women. And yet the poets exalt these creatures, *flagellum Dei!*”

“I have no use for poets either,” said I. “But you will admit that an advertising booklet with such things in it won’t appeal to the ladies.”

“What do I care for your advertising pamphlet or your ladies?” exclaimed Dr. Pertusius. “But I go a great deal further than that.”

“I should think that would be difficult.”

Hereupon the doctor proceeded as follows:

“All the women to-day want to make themselves beautiful. . . .”

“That is for our benefit, Doctor!” I replied.

“I am not so sure, not so sure. . . .” He reflected a while, and then said: “It seems to me to-day that all the women are striving, as an ideal, to approach the type of delinquent woman. Was this ordained by man, to add a

sharper tang to the pleasure women give? Or was it woman who perversely chose to hasten man's downfall? I don't know, I don't know. But so it is. Where nowadays do we ever see the flush of modesty that formerly overspread the cheeks of maidenhood?"

"Superseded by our *Ravissante* face powder, carnation pink, at seven lire the box."

"Ah, you are joking! Well, Cavaliere, I will turn your own words against you. Consider the present fashions, they are extremely significant. People think that fashions are of small importance, something that concerns only the tailors and dressmakers. On the contrary, they are a deeply philosophic problem."

"Bravo, Doctor! That's something to put in our book."

"Don't you see in the streets certain fashionably dressed women who look as though they had come from the hands of an upholsterer?"

"Oh, Doctor! We can't put that in! *Gliss-sons!*"

"And certain others wearing strange black mantles, that make them resemble those repulsive night moths called *Atropus*? And certain others who drag around their weight of flesh and fine feathers, looking like the Battalion of Death—from excesses? And certain bewildered expressions of the face that make you

wonder if they are brooding over the first symptoms of a bad cold? And what has become of adolescence? One sees half-developed young girls contorting and 'shimmying' like Her-maphrodites!"

I begged him to explain those last ugly words. He did so.

"How disgusting!" said I.

"It's they who are disgusting, not I. Don't call it disgusting; call it *a sign of the times*. Virginity that was once a question of family honor means nothing now." (Excepting for Fräulein Violetta. But I have decided not to marry her.)

"Social marasmus is approaching, not only with the iron-shod foot of the proletariat, but also with the beaded silk slipper of the pretty woman."

"Don't let us get side-tracked on politics, Doctor, it isn't hygienic."

"Do you think I meddle in politics? No, I merely look on from the window. A pretty figure I would cut, helping police modern society! I observe the phenomenon with a scientist's objectivity. Have you never watched the women of the fashionable world, in hotel parlors, at theaters and restaurants? They pass from the depths of depression to the heights of rapture. Then *swish, swish!* They are polishing their

finger-nails. And the next moment they throw themselves back in their chairs in a new ecstasy. They sigh, they laugh wildly, they 'vamp' with the deadly eyes of Medusa. Then they rise with a serpentine quiver and drag their limbs through the steps of the latest fashionable dance, short petticoats and gowns clinging tight to their limbs. Those are your present-day models. What sort of wives and mothers could you make of them?"

"From your point of view," said I, "you are as much an artist as my friend Lionello. But don't let's exaggerate! If I understand you, a wife who would at once satisfy the requirements of æsthetics and hygiene is an impossibility?"

"I don't say that. I only say that it would take a long hunt."

"A hunt for what?"

"For another, and less obvious kind of beauty, a tender beauty robed in purity. And you must pay special heed to the eyes, above all else! The eye is the only unguarded point at which you can approach the fortress of the brain. The eyes of the type of woman I mean must be absolutely limpid, liquid, unafraid; you must be able to perceive in their depths something which the woman herself cannot tell you: namely, moral purity as distinct from natural purity. The kind of eyes that are stealthy, like

snakes, alternately hidden and then darting swift, quivering glances, are to be shunned. But a woman's eyes not only may, but should, be overclouded with a tender veil of tears, provided she has just cause. As for smiles and laughter. . . ."

"Then young women should laugh?"

"Of course. Healthful, pleasing, ringing laughter—but that, too, only for good cause! The strained, set lips, the stereotyped smirk are dangerous symptoms. Then as to singing . . ."

"That's fine, Doctor, I love music."

"And I hate music," exclaimed Dr. Pertusius. "Because it is the most enervating art."

"I'll take your word for that. But how in the world is the young lady to sing without music?"

"Without music and without a piano! Just from sheer light-heartedness, as the birds sing when they wake up in the morning. And no novel reading, mind you! The least harm that could do would be to give her the absorbed, dreamy air of those wretched women who know nothing about housework."

"Any further data?"

Pertusius replied: "Avoid pallid complexions, moonlight, tea-rose, pale-cream. Leave such complexions to poets, novelists and the rest

of the writing fraternity. It is true that Ovid in his 'Art of Love' has laid down the precept, *pallat omnis amans*, 'All lovers should be pale,' but he, too, is stupid and meretricious! Beneath the pale-cream of the poets lurks scrofula and pus. Nor is the faint rose flush any better. 'Oh, violet! oh, lily!' sigh the poets. Say rather, 'Koch's bacillus.' "

"Then what complexion should she have?"

"*Nigra sum sed formosa!*"

"Sorry, but I don't understand."

"That means a brunette complexion, full of nature's own strength."

"And what else?"

"Her teeth! Strong teeth, well entrenched in the gums: white, of course, but not transparent, not mother-of-pearl, not full of gold and platinum fillings! And then find out at what time the young lady rises in the morning. And how are her eyes? Are they naturally clear? Is she bright or dull in the morning? What time does she go to bed at night? Is she brave? What is the mother like? Find out about the mother and the father, too. Shall we be less careful than a cattle dealer who looks at the mother cow before he buys the calf? Is she active? There are some girls whom men find charming because of their indolence. 'As indolent as a Creole,' sing the poets; 'Stretched

upon a divan like an odalisque.' The idiots! She must be active, nimble, able to wait on herself, and not forever have a maid at her elbow. And as for temperament, better too cold than too ardent. I almost forgot the most important thing of all, has she good digestion?"

"How unpoetic, Doctor," said I.

"It is the opposite that is unpoetic," he retorted, "when a young lady tells you, 'I have a headache, I feel depressed,' then it is she who is unpoetic. Oh! And is she neat? Let me explain: Neat of course but within limits: A young woman who gives too much attention to her toilet makes me think of certain hotel cooks who wash the venison over and over because it is too gamey. And she must have well kept nails."

"I agree to that," said I.

"Yes, but she mustn't spend the entire day trimming and polishing them. Another thing: What kind of stockings does she wear? Ah, those perfidious silk stockings! Ah, those high-heeled slippers and the hysterical gait that goes with them! Beautiful broad, flat heeled shoes! They are a guarantee that when the young woman goes to bed at night she will not inflict on you the sight of deformed feet. Women ought to be born into the world like Nuremburg dolls, or else go to bed with their stockings on—as

one class of them do. And lastly, do not seek a wife for carnal pleasure! Tobias, in the Bible, when he married Sarah, said: 'I take this maiden for my wife, not for the pleasure of the senses, but for the sake of offspring.' And the Lord blessed Tobias and Sarah, and they lived happily together. One thing more The young lady must not lack perfume."

"That's another thing that suits me."

"Let me explain: perfume without perfumery. You know there is a fine saying in Latin, *mulier bene olet que nil olet.*"

"Which means?"

"'Woman is the best perfumed when she has no perfume,' that is, none but her natural fragrance."

"Doctor," said I, "it seems to me that we are throwing stones at our own dove-cote."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"I mean that an advertising pamphlet, written in the foregoing terms would be a disaster for our house. Our house, of which I have the honor of being director, makes a specialty of digestive tablets, pomades, complexion powders, hair dyes, powder for polishing the nails and perfume which, as we proclaim in our advertisements, add a new fascination to personal charm. A pamphlet in the terms you suggest is contrary to our interests; not to mention that the

sort of young woman you describe is an article that does not exist in modern business. The true woman starts from her silk stockings up!"

That is how we parted. The pamphlet will not be written.

CHAPTER VI

A SIXTEENTH CENTURY ARCHER

“**T**O all appearances Ginetto Sconer’s marriage is another thing that is never going to be.”

I returned home and and there in the parlor I found Maioli. He is an extraordinary man. I have known him since the days when my territory covered the town of P——. He says that he was a cavalry officer at the time of the battle of Custoza, but he has remained unchanged ever since: a rather gaunt figure, short, rapid strides, white hair, white necktie and a flower in his button hole. His complexion is as fresh and rosy as that of a baby. After he has spoken he always gives a contented little laugh. He certainly doesn’t do it to show his teeth, because they are false. He must laugh for hygienic reasons. When anything pleases him he puckers up his lips as if to whistle, and sucks in his breath. When, on the contrary, something displeases him, he does the opposite, and blows out; and when he is deeply moved, he weeps; these actions also must all be measures of hygiene.

"If you will only tell me," I have often said to him, "what you have done to perserve yourself so wonderfully since the time of the battle of Custoza, I will put you in all my advertisements as a living example of the efficacy of my *Vitaline*, and give you ten thousand lire besides."

He must also have a secret method for preserving clothes. Every little while I see him reappear in certain suits that I recognize from years ago. "You are always so well dressed," I tell him. "That is partly due to my good figure," he answered, "and partly to the Countess, my wife."

When he mentions *the Countess*, his wife, he always becomes much moved.

Maioli is a provincial; he lives in the town of P—— with the Countess, his wife, "who is a treasure in the home"; his canaries, which are extremely intelligent; his flowers which are extraordinarily beautiful; and his antiques, among which the Countess, his wife, must be included. Since Maioli is well versed in old paintings, old hangings, old rubbish, and since there is a whole bunch of bankrupt noble families in P——, he puts through enough good deals to keep him going.

When not at home, Maioli is a guest "in the castle of his good friend Count A.," or in "the

villa of his other good friend Marquis B.” He must be an enjoyable guest, because at the end of dinner he can sing old-fashioned songs, such as “The Lively Theresa;” he knows a dozen ancient *bons mots*; and recalls the high-life scandals of by-gone days.

He had come to see me to ask if I would trade him a certain automobile, in exchange for a painting by Pinturicchio. “It would add nobility,” said he, “to this apartment of yours.” I thanked him but declined the offer.

“That is because you don’t appreciate Pinturicchio.”

“Very possibly, but I am not selling.”

“Well, of course, with an apartment like this, you couldn’t be expected to appreciate Pinturicchio.”

“What do you mean by that? What’s the matter with my apartment? Does it smell bad?” For I noticed that he had wrinkled up his nose as if he perceived a bad odor.

“At least, my good friend, remove that door mat with its inscription, ‘Please Wipe Your Shoes.’ Yes, it’s a fine apartment: marble stairway, parquette floors, steam heat—but there is an indefinable lack, an indefinable lack of . . . I would wager that some house-furnishing establishment fitted out this apartment for you on contract.”

“What do you mean by your ‘indefinable lack?’ It has everything!”

“Yes, but too much new stuff, too much gold, too much stucco. The eye has no chance to rest. Forgive me, my good friend, but your wall ornaments look as though they had come from a rummage sale. Did you yourself pick out this apartment?”

“I own it!”

“The deuce, you say! Did you build it yourself?”

“I bought it at a bargain. It formerly belonged to the Counts of Tornamali, but now it belongs to me.”

He blew out his breath.

“What’s the matter now, my dear Count?” (I call him Count in compliment to the Countess, his wife; it pleases him, and it doesn’t hurt me.)

“The trouble is that the old houses are disappearing. . . .”

“And new ones are replacing them,” I answered.

“And the garden also is yours?”

“Naturally.”

“Yes, that is how it is. You would be quite capable of installing an up-to-date butler, issuing invitations for a garden party, discussing art, indulging in philanthropy. . . .”

"I don't find anything extraordinary in all that."

He gazed around him, then he gazed at me, and at last said, "The fact is, my dear friend, that there is many a high-born young woman whom you might make very happy."

(That is what they all say. It pleased me so much that I immediately invited him to stay to luncheon.)

"But why, my good friend" he inquired, "why don't you take a wife?"

"That is precisely what I am looking for, but I can't find one." And I proceeded to give him the details of my misadventures.

"Naturally," he exclaimed, "naturally, my good friend! You are seeking a wife in your own money-grubbing class. You won't find her; you will only find cheap imitation goods, sateens, mercerized cottons—not a real wife."

"And you are offering me *crêpe de Chine*?"

"*Crêpe de Chine* nothing! Brocade with golden lilies! Rare old *ancien régime*, still so fresh and beautiful after two centuries that they look as if made yesterday. . . ."

"May I ask, my dear Count, if this *ancien régime* you are offering me also dates back several centuries?"

He shook his white mane with indulgent compassion, and said:

"Forgive me, my dear friend, but you don't understand, you simply can't understand what *ancien régime* means. I could offer you—pray observe that I *offer* because I do not guarantee that she will accept—the true heroine, the mysterious and superb woman who would give the ennobling touch to your apartment, and if you permit me to say so, to yourself."

"*Ancien régime* of which period?" I demanded.

"Pray be serious; the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I am sorry," I replied, "but the position of the most beautiful woman in the world is already filled: *Fraülein Violetta*—by popular edict."

And I proceeded to give him details regarding the incomparable *Fräulein Violetta*.

"Bah!" exclaimed Maioli and he made certain gestures with his hand as if brushing away a swarm of flies. "There is your true type of grave-digger; first they strip you bare, and then they dance a revolutionary *can-can* above your tombstone."

Imagine if Lionello and the other poets could have heard him talk like that about *Fräulein Violetta*! "But tell me," said I, "is this young lady whom you are offering me also a Vestal like *Fräulein Violetta*?"

"Stop, stop! When jokes are made on sacred

subjects, I have no more to say. Shall we call it off?"

"How touchy you are! Of course not! On the contrary, tell me some more. I presume, not that it matters, that she is as penniless as the rest of the nobility in your neighborhood."

"Do you want to make even marriage a business affair? Money, money, money! Diamonds, diamonds, diamonds! That's all you think of. Why, an attic chamber in Donna Ghiselda's palace is worth more than your whole junk-shop taken together! Authentic work of Bramante! I need say no more."

To make my peace with Maioli, I ordered up a bottle of champagne. "Well then, as we were saying: respectable competence on which to start married life. But will she be capable of giving me an heir?"

"Two heirs, if you need them."

"That brings us to another matter: is she plump or thin? Tall or short? Blonde or brunette?"

"Those are matters," said Maioli, "which must be seen; they cannot be described. I will say only this: she is like this champagne. What is this excellent champagne of yours? An imprisoned sunray. But the cork leaps forth, and lo and behold, the sunshine! The poor, dear girl!"

Maioli held the glass of champagne on the level with his eyes; and two tears trickled down his smooth, pink old cheeks.

"Calm yourself, Count. But at least tell me, is she healthy?"

"Healthy? She is like a young archer of the sixteenth century."

"Is she trustworthy?"

Maioli's eyes flashed dangerously: "I make allowances for you, because you have never seen Donna Ghiselda."

"I like her name. She must be at least a duchess," said I, for Maioli had avoided mentioning her title.

"Contessina," he rejoined solemnly.

I asked where one might have a sight of this champagne, this sixteenth century archer, this Contessina.

"You certainly don't expect me to bring her here! If some Sunday, about midday you take a trip to P—— and visit the pastry shop called La Maddalena, on the Corso, I can present her to you. That is the hour when I take my vermouth, and Donna Ghiselda stops in there after late mass, to buy a few sweets."

"So the *Contessina* attends mass?"

"Naturally! All of us members of the nobility go to mass; if for no other reason, we do so

as a dignified protest against the common rabble that no longer has any religion. Besides, pardon the question, but without religion what sort of a marriage are you proposing?"

CHAPTER VII

THE CONTESSINA GHISELDA

I GAVE the following order to my chauffeur:
“To-morrow, Sunday morning, be on hand promptly at nine o'clock. We are going to P——. Plan to reach there by half past eleven.”

Why this decision? I do not know; but the idea of marrying a young Contessina has given me a delightful foretaste of proud dominion. I had never before thought much about blue blood. Now, I contemplate the future, after I have married the Contessina. Naturally, at the start she does not love me. She has married me because she is poor, she has been bought! That is a delicious thought, to buy a countess! She moves about, proud and disdainful through this apartment. But I am the model of self-restraint and delicate consideration; I demand nothing, I merely wait! Until one fine day, the little countess says to me: “Ginetto Sconer, you are a pearl among men, an ideal husband.” Exactly like the *Maître de Forges*. It is strange, but ever since Maioli's talk about champagne I have been obsessed by a haunting vi-

sion of a blonde. But it may have been partly the effect of Lionello's novels. When that man tosses off his women fresh from the griddle of high art, they are so beautifully light and golden, that there is no such thing as forgetting them.

Maioli lays it on too thick. There is no telling what his penniless provincial Contessina may turn out to be. All the same, I made an unusually careful toilet, and put plenty of money in my pocket-book. Why did I do that? Because I felt that I was on my way to buy a countess. If all goes well, we will buy twin beds, and over the head-boards we will hang a tapestry with an Infant Jesus. That at least is a luxury I can well afford.

It was an enjoyable trip; my powerful limousine sped through the May sunshine, entered P—— at precisely quarter to twelve, and drew up, under the admiring eyes of the good provincials, in front of the pastry shop of La Madelena, specified by Maioli.

Maioli was there himself taking his vermouth.

"My dear, dear friend!" he greeted me, "Never in the world did I dream of seeing you so soon."

"We business men observe an almost German punctuality."

"And this is your automobile?"

"Yes, but not the one I was to exchange for

the Pinturicchio. That one I am reserving for you, if all goes well."

"Would you like," said he, in a mysterious tone, "to walk over to the church? You have just time to see her kneeling in prayer. It affords an interesting point of view."

"I prefer," said I, "to wait here at the pastry shop."

"In that case I will introduce you to the proprietor; one of the great artists of the confectionary art; genuine butter, genuine preserved fruits. In making out his checks he is apt to muddle his figures; the only thing he gets right is the sum total. But I see that mass is over."

"How do you know that, Count?"

My question was answered by a swarm of young girls bursting into the pastry shop. Vast rustling of skirts, prodigious chattering. They all circle around in stiffly starched petticoats; they all wear flowers; they all stand proudly erect in well polished little shoes, and toss their flaunting feathers in the air. They diffuse a fragrance of dainty scented garments. Behind come the mammas in black, saying: "Gently, gently, dear girls!" Little prayer-books are laid on the glass tops of the show cases; little hands, some bare, some gloved, stretch forth; eager eyes open widely; little

parcels of dainties take shape. They also eat some of them, with mamma's permission. Pretty little mouths open.

"I'll take a chocolate éclair."

"What do you want, Mary, a charlotte russe?"

"This cream puff is delicious!"

"Oh, and fresh-baked *sfogliatelle*!"

With eager chins thrust forward, they crunch the *sfogliatelle*, and the little hands brush away the crumbs from their frocks.

"Good Heavens, wasn't it wonderful?"

"How beautifully he spoke this morning!"

"Is it true, mamma, that he goes from here to Rome?"

"Yes, darling, but be careful, you are spilling the cream puff."

"They are all bubbling over with enthusiasm; and I am not sure whether it is on account of the cream puffs, the *sfogliatelle* or something quite different. So I asked Maioli:

"What are they talking of?"

"A visiting preacher who has been delivering a series of lectures in the oratory of the church, on the mission of women. Oh, there is still plenty of religion in P——"

More women and young girls came in. Suddenly I said, "There she is."

"You have divined rightly," said Maioli solemnly.

A golden radiance had entered. It was the month of May, yet daylight was outrivaled, as Lionello would say. It was she! It was she! She wore a veil. My heart gave a jump! One hand raised the veil, which reached only to her nose. Heavens, what an aristocratic nose! The other hand took a *marron glacé*; the mouth opened, the *marron glacé* disappeared. Happy *marron glacé*!

I pressed the Count's hand in silence. He was much moved. So was I!

But all at once, all the young girls clustered around the Contessina, first one spoke and then another, and then all talked at once.

"Yes, yes, yes, Contessina! We must have you as Chairman of the committee for the farewell reception to the Padre. Yes, yes, yes!"

"But there will have to be two committees," said one of the young voices.

"No! One committee only," said another young voice.

"But it would be impossible," exclaimed the girl with the cream-puff, "for me to be on the same committee with my own dress-maker, you must see that!"

I heard the Contessina reply gravely:

"My dear girls, I am awfully sorry, but I must beg you to excuse me. Oh, yes, absolutely." Then, discovering the presence of

Maioli, she added, "Pardon me!" and in an instant she had shaken herself free from all those young women, and made a straight line for our table. Her face, which a moment before had looked so serious, now that she had her back turned to the young women, changed to a swift grimace of derision.

"Ouff! Thanks, dear Maioli," she said, "for rescuing me from all those modest sensitive plants. They are still vibrating to the words of the preacher."

"Donna Ghiselda, dear Donna Ghiselda, what a pleasure!" said Maioli, agitating his silver mane from excess emotion. "I am told, however, that he is a very powerful preacher."

"Why, yes, a clever and tactful little priest, who knows how to use pathos effectively. All through this month of May he has led the matrons and the modest sensitive plants shivering on the very brink of sin. He has the trick of making the stories of Abelard and Héloïse, of Ruth and Naomi very fascinating. At present those young girls are all repeating: '*Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge!*' They have already come to me to ask me to lend them a Bible. 'That is forbidden, my dear girls!'—'Then Abelard and Héloïse?'—'Still more forbidden!' No more lending books for me! I had all the trouble

I wanted the time I lent them *Madame Bovary*. Ha, ha, ha!"

I had naturally sprung to my feet with military rigidity. I confess that I was disconcerted, because that very gown that she wore was disconcerting. It was not in accord with the latest demands of fashion, but neither was it provincial, like the dresses of those young girls. She was tall, much taller than those girls; and yet she and they were much on the same level!

Yes, she was an archer of the sixteenth century; but be it plainly understood that she was, alas! only too well aware that she was a female archer.

How old was she? Heavens, how old? Perhaps twenty-five, perhaps thirty. One thing is sure, that even when seen close by her face showed no fear of the analysis of my keen glance.

When she had finished her light "Ha, ha, ha!" I called to mind the metallic tinkle of my Bechstein, and I said to myself, "Ginetto, keep yourself in hand!"

"Donna Ghiselda," said Maioli, "pray be seated."

"Just for one little moment, because I am expecting mamma."

"Meanwhile, permit me to present my good friend, Cavaliere Ginetto Sconer, who has only just arrived in his automobile from Milan."

Thereupon I made my most ceremonious bow, and we all sat down.

"I was looking everywhere," said the Contessina "to discover the owner of that limousine. So it belongs to you?"

"And very much at your service, Contessina."

Hereupon I underwent a rapid fire of questions by the Contessina regarding my automobile.

"New model, yes, Contessina. Twenty-four horse power, automatic starter, electric lights."

"Is this your first visit to P——?"

"No, I have been here several times, but never under such fortunate circumstances."

"Then you must know the artistic antiquities of P——?"

"I am sorry to say, no," I replied, "but your presence is excuse enough for my being unaware that this neighborhood has any artistic antiquities."

The Contessina once more repeated her, "Ha, ha, ha!" then she added, "Very gallantly said!"

"Contessina," I replied gravely, "I always keep a firm footing upon the literal truth."

"You come from Milan?"

"Yes, straight from Milan."

"Are you in close touch with the artists there?"

“Lionello . . .”

“Ah, do you know Lionello? Delicious, delicious, delicious!”

(Fortunate Lionello! Wherever I go, all the ladies call him “delicious.”)

“But with some reservations,” said I.

“You mean to say?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Signorina.”

“Pray don’t hesitate.”

“He is a little—a little— How shall I put it? In certain situations in his plays, he is rather daring. . . .”

The Contessina repeated her “Ha, ha, ha!” in a most disconcerting manner.

“But in art, my dear sir,” she told me, “it is no longer the fashion to beat about the bush through three hundred pages. Does it offend you? Are you, by chance, a moral reformer?”

“Heaven forbid,” said I.

She studied me a moment, and then asked,

“Are you also an artist?”

“Yes, Signorina! An artist of beauty.”

Hereupon Maioli explained that I was the head of the firm of X—— & Company. “A business man, to be sure! But what of it? To-day the whole world is trending that way.”

The Contessina repeated her “Ha, ha, ha!” in a way that I found offensive. I pride myself on being a perfect gentleman as regards pretty

women, reserving my right to square accounts with the homely ones. Accordingly, I took no offense at this repeated "Ha, ha, ha!" but merely said to Signor Maioli; "I beg you to note that business men are essentially energetic and worth the whole tribe of painters and poets, since they constitute the solid, and at the same time, easy-running roadbed on which the entire train of civilization passes. Sleeping-car, first class, third class, even the cattle trains. Do you get me?" I spoke with considerable energy.

The Contessina became quite serious, and said, "Why, your friend is very intelligent, dear Maioli."

"Of course he is. Any man who makes his million in these days is intelligent, altogether too intelligent!" sighed Maioli.

"Oh, Maioli," said I, "a million! that's what they used to say. But to-day, what does a million amount to? It is hardly enough for even a modest scale of living. But what is a million, what is a billion in comparison with divine beauty? The epiphany of beauty, as Lionello would say? A mere nothing! A vanishing point."

"Why, he is really charming, this friend of yours, dear Maioli," said the Contessina.

"He is a happy man," said Maioli.

"Happiness is a duty," said the Contessina.

"I like that thought," said I, "although for the last half hour I have ceased to know whether I am happy or unhappy?"

"Which means to say?" inquired the Contessina, transforming her whole face into a tragic mask.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare."

"But you never dare anything!"

"Well then, Contessina, if I must confess, this making your acquaintance . . ."

The tragic mask dissolved suddenly into a comic one, and she burst out once more with her light tinkling "Ha, ha, ha!" This lady is certainly disconcerting.

"Oh, there is mamma!" suddenly exclaimed the Contessina. A carriage had drawn up before the door of the pastry shop. Donna Ghiselda rose, and ran to the door. Maioli, also, got up and started out to pay his respects to the old lady. I remained sitting there alone, and idly opened the prayer book, which the Contessina had laid upon the table, when suddenly I heard myself addressed:

"So, you are prying into my secrets! You have a great deal of curiosity!"

It was the Contessina who had come upon me unawares to rescue her prayer book from my hands.

"I beg your pardon," said I.

“Would you like to see? Are you really curious?”

She opened the book herself, and I read: “Paul Verlaine: *Confessions*.”

“Have you read them?”

“No, I’m sorry to say.”

“Religious poems, or on that order.”

I too accompanied the Contessina through the door. A black coupé was standing there; within the coupé, a commanding face framed in silver hair: the Countess Mother. But the new introduction was of the most perfunctory sort, because the old lady is quite deaf. The Contessina sprang in, the coupé door was closed; we made our bow.

“Ah, Maioli,” cried the Contessina, suddenly thrusting out her head as the coupé started, “you might arrange with your friend to make up a party to visit all the artistic monuments.”

“What an honor,” I exclaimed!

An old black horse in ancient silver-mounted harness set off at a leisurely trot, and the coupé departed.

“Poor Grifone!” exclaimed Maioli.

“Who is Grifone?”

“The horse belonging to the Countess Mother.”

“That horse,” said I, “must date from the family’s heroic days.”

“And what days they were, my friend!” sighed Maioli.”

“You have barely had a glimpse of the Countess Mother! She was once one of the most fascinating and, so to speak, radio-active women that I have ever known. But she was *ancien régime*! Ah, my good friend, those who have not known the *ancien régime*, do not know, as Prince Talleyrand used to say, the true meaning of the joy of living. What a woman, the Countess Mother! I once defined her as ‘a bouquet of roses in a confessional.’ Rather neat, don’t you think? Her salon distils sad memories to men of my age. We were at the flood-tide of romanticism then, and all the young men considered themselves knights.”

“And the Contessina shared her favors with the whole knightly company?”

“How plebeian you always are in your expressions, my dear Sconer! In any case, you cannot be unaware that a lady of great beauty cannot evade certain obligations which such beauty imposes!”

“And is there not danger, dear Count, that the daughter may follow in the footsteps of her mother?”

“I admire your foresight; but it is groundless, for a very simple reason: Donna Ghiselda is essentially an intellectual.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEROIC LOVES OF THE CONTESSINA

I ASKED Maioli to get into the automobile and come and take luncheon with me at the hotel. The Hotel of the Golden Eagle where I had taken a room in passing, was a solitary and gloomy edifice, just as everything in the town is solitary and gloomy, excepting the little stretch of the Corso.

"This hotel has lodged Joseph II, Charles the Bourbon and Charles the Happy," said Maioli.

"It is evident," said I, "that those gentlemen in their time were not fastidious."

At last a waiter in prehistoric habiliments, appeared in the dining-room, and Maioli proceeded to give his orders.

"Have you *tortelloni di ricotta*, with meat gravy? Excellent. But smoking hot! And afterwards, which do you prefer, Sconer, an omelet with truffles, or a veal cutlet with bacon? They are both specialties of the town."

When the smoking platter of *tortelloni* with meat gravy arrived, one searching glance sufficed to assure him that it was all that it should be.

"Incomparable, eh?" said Maioli as he gracefully slid into his small well-shaped mouth the first *tortellone*, that dripped big tears of butter.

"What's incomparable? The *tortelloni*?"

"No! Donna Ghiselda. Admit the truth: She surpassed your expectations, Sconer."

"Quite so. She is rather astonishing even if one does come from Milan. If she let down all that hair, it would be a blond Niagara."

"And then, her enduring quality!" said Maioli, "You see, true beauty is the lasting kind, organic, racial. And have you observed? In Donna Ghiselda you have a blending of the rectilinear and the curvilinear; of the evanescent with the consistent; of classic beauty with modern caprice. And look at the way she walks! Nowadays every tradesman's wife walks with the same mincing, affected steps. But Ghiselda is natural, like an eight-spring stage coach of the good old times, and at the same time she is as rhythmic as though hidden cupids marked time for her on unseen violins. True beauty, you see, Sconer, always obeys some rhythm in all its movements. And her extremities? My friend, have you observed her extremities? Give Venus Callipyge a pair of huge feet, and Venus is ruined." At this point in came the cutlets with bacon. Maioli paused, examined the cutlets, assured himself that they

were quite right, and then continued: "The extremities, my friend! The despair of nature, of painting and, let us add, of the bourgeoisie! I admit, Sconer, that I admire the modern progress shown is a well manicured hand. But it savors of the artificial. I cannot conceive of a goddess having recourse to manicures and pedicures."

"Count," said I, "perhaps the Contessina is a little too imposing for me."

"I was prepared to have you make that objection. But please remember that your pocket editions of society dolls are a form of degeneracy. But in Ghiselda's case I will explain why you think her so imposing: it is because you are not accustomed to the majesty of race. But you have observed how she laughs?"

"Yes, I have. She is all the time bursting out with a 'ha! ha! ha!' for nothing at all. She seems to include the whole surrounding audience. Yet I like it, because it sounds as though she had genuine pearls in her throat."

"And her eyes, my dear friend? Aren't they amazing?"

"Her eyes," said I, "are indeed exceptional. Perhaps a little too much *maquillage*, but I don't mind that."

"That is proof of your good taste," said Maioli. "Making up their faces was already

an established custom among the ladies of ancient Egypt. And what did you think of Ghiselda's intelligence? Had she lived in other times she would have been destined to leave her imprint upon the pages of history. If Ghiselda does you the honor to become your wife, your home will be the rendezvous of the most distinguished personalities in art and politics."

"Let us be careful, my dear Count, not to anticipate events too fast. What I am more interested in knowing is how it happens that the Contessina is still unmarried at what we may call a somewhat advanced period in life's spring-time."

"Why, that is only natural! Would you expect a woman like that to fall in love with an ordinary man? But replying more directly to the question you ask, I will tell you that Ghiselda, alas! has consumed her best years in a fruitless passion for a young man who showed great promise."

"Count," I interrupted, "this sounds serious to me."

"*Serious* isn't the word, because in Donna Ghiselda all things are pure. It is a case of heroic love!"

"In that case, let us hear the rest."

Maioli sipped his glass of chartreuse with the

tip of his tongue, but instead of continuing he asked me this question:

“Do you know what is really and truly the worst evil from which Italy is suffering?”

“She hasn’t learned how to advertise herself.”

“Pray be serious, Sconer! Italy’s greatest evil is that she lacks an aristocracy! That the healthy forces of the nation are not organized against the *canaille*! It is true that we nobles have sacrificed our own interests for the good of Italy; but so little gratitude do we get that if one of us dares to speak, they tell us; ‘Hold your tongue, you are a reactionary!’ If we wish to live we must be silent. In this section the lower classes are worse than in Milan, worse than in Turin, worse than in Bologna, and that says the whole thing! At all events, one day there appeared among us a man of genius. Did I say genius? Alas! we thought he was! He spoke admirably; he challenged the common herd with magnificent invective: ‘Wretched slaves, fit only to open the doors through which the man of genius may pass! Beasts of burden, fit for nothing but to bear the weight of the nation’s glory! No truce with the *canaille*! If the *canaille* comes into power, the first thing it will do will be to raise the gallows for us. Let us raise the gallows for

them, while we still have time!" Fine, isn't it? But the real genius was not he, it was Ghiselda! The dear girl gave her all for the great cause. She played the part of his Nymph Egeria! We became aware at election time that he was not a genius. That electoral contest proved to be a real disaster, my good friend."

"That I can well believe. For my part there is as little choice in politics as between your omelet with truffles and your cutlet with bacon—but in the one case we must have eggs, and in the other we must have veal."

"In other words . . . ?"

"In other words, you all fell down because you are as sapless as dried figs."

"Oh! oh! oh!" protested Maioli, scandalized. "We could have stood up against a spadeful, but not an artillery fire of slime!"

"One can wash up afterwards," said I. "Our firm specializes in soap. And was the Contessina in the thick of it?"

"It was terrible, my dear friend, terrible. There were allusions in their shameless papers, vile gutter phrases, and during the election there were actually obscene cartoons on the walls. Those cattle do not even know the meaning of the word 'chivalry.' The poor girl did not venture to show herself in the streets; and when I

left my house in the morning I felt my knees tremble under me."

"And her love for the man of genius?"

"Vanished! You understand that when a man of genius makes a fiasco, he ceases to be a man of genius. Poor dear girl! The rabble insisted that it was she who had ruined him. I need only add that she was obliged for a time to remain secluded in her magnificent family estate, The Cypresses. 'Maioli,' she used to say to me, 'it is terrible! I am desperate. Sooner than live any longer in P—— I would marry the first man I could get.'"

"Whereupon you thought of me," said I.

"Sconer! Sconer, you hurt my feelings! On the contrary, I must tell you that after a time Ghiselda calmed down; another kind of activity absorbed her completely. Art, my friend, sublime, sublime art! Though you, of course, cannot understand."

While we were talking in this strain, a *patter-clack, patter-clack* was heard on the silent road below us. Maioli almost overturned the table, dishes and all, in his haste to reach the balcony.

"It is she. Come, hurry! Ah, you are too late. She has gone by! All the same, come, come! You can admire the rear view, Venus Callipyge."

I too hurried out; I was barely in time to catch a glimpse of the Contessina, in riding habit, disappearing in the distance with a mounted cavalier.

“Who is that with her?”

“Her brother. Count Desiderio, a lieutenant in the cavalry.”

CHAPTER IX

AN ARTISTIC EXCURSION

THAT night I dreamed of the Contessina. I was a Turkish Pasha, like the one in the picture, seated on his throne buying nude slave girls. I was buying Ghiselda; I felt her over and examined her carefully. I gave Maioli, who was the negro slave dealer, a considerable number of those faithful friends called ten-lire notes. Ghiselda was humble and silent and, clad only in her own hair, she was a sight to drive one crazy!

I was in the midst of dressing the next morning when the man servant brought me this note:

Dear Sconer:

Donna Ghiselda does you the honor to serve as your guide in a visit to the monuments and environs. Have your automobile ready at two o'clock.

MAIOLI.

"Fine," said I, "this means a pleasant day."

But alas and alack! They made me use up gallon upon gallon of gasoline, at the price it

costs to-day, and I did not have a single happy moment.

Here is how it all passed off: at two o'clock the Contessina arrived with Maioli and a third individual, a sort of dwarf, who barely reached up to my shoulder and wore a khaki-colored sport coat.

"Cioccolani," said the Contessina to me, by way of introducing him. Just Cioccolani, and nothing more! The little dwarf contented himself with bowing his head, as though some one had dragged it down against his will with a string. Maioli explained that the gentleman did me the honor to serve as artistic guide. "By all means," said I, "pray join us," and without further urging the dwarf installed himself beside the Contessina and assumed command of my automobile.

Thus began the personally conducted tour of the monuments: churches, baptistery, cloisters, palaces, monasteries, and so forth. I am going to be frank: I had no desire to see any of these things; but since the proposal had come from them, courtesy demanded that they should take the trouble to explain them. On the contrary, I might as well not have been there! At every place we came to such a violent discussion broke out between them that at one place a priest came out to protest against the noise.

They kept telling me "Look here! . . . Look

there! . . . Do you see that?" Usually this was in the churches where it was so dark that I could see nothing at all. Besides what difference did it make to me anyway? But the limit was reached when Maioli was in the midst of telling me, "Look up there, isn't that divine? By Giotto, you know! And the apse, Pinturicchio . . ." And more of the same sort; I heard the other two laughing, and the dwarf saying, "Dynamite, dynamite!"

I went over to them and looking down at him from the vantage of my full height, I demanded. "And why dynamite?" He raised his impudent face toward mine, and said, "To demolish all these cemeteries of the past that put their taboo on the future. Do you happen to be of a contrary opinion?"

"Not in the least! Blow them up by all means. Even in Milan we have futurists who think as you do."

"They too are out of date now," he replied.

"So much the better," said I.

"Sconer, Sconer!" cried Maioli in deep emotion, "Look over there at that tryptich! Isn't it divine, eh, what?"

"Well, don't weep over it, Maioli, even if it is. Tell me, instead, who in the world is that little *half-package*?"

"An artist."

"An architect?"

"No."

"A painter?"

"No, a poet."

"A local poet?"

"One of our shining lights."

"But what does he do? How does he live?"

"He writes great poetry."

Such was our artistic tour of the monuments. The privilege of paying the tips was left to me.

Afterwards came the excursion into the environs. Our artistic guide continued to give the orders. It was almost a pleasure to hear him commanding, as calmly as though he himself owned the automobile: "Faster, faster!" And turn to the right, turn to the left, uphill, downhill, all at full speed! "Faster! Faster! Let's overtake Boote's Wagon! Let us collide with the star Vega!" I heard him telling the Contessina. The Contessina was waving a bunch of long-stemmed roses in her hand, and she too kept saying: "Faster, faster!"

But since the automobile was mine, and Biagino, my chauffeur, had no special dispensation from providence, we stopped a moment, long enough for me to take my place beside him. If we should run down any one, I was the one who would pay the piper.

It was fair to suppose that out here in the open country those three would get along peaceably: because the country is what it is. But not a bit of it! "Nature," cried the poet, "demands abuse, she needs to be kicked and beaten!"

"Not at all," said Maioli, "nature needs caresses."

"No, no, Maioli," said the Contessina, "Violence alone is dynamic. "Stop, stop," she cried the next moment.

"Please stop the car," I said to Biagino; and we came to a standstill.

"Tell us, Signor Sconer," said the Contessina, "since you have, so to speak, a virgin soul, what do you see?"

"I?"

"Yes, you," said the Contessina, "what do you see before you?"

"The road, and if we are not more careful . . ."

"No, I am speaking of the landscape."

"Ah!"

It was about half past six: the sun was setting in the midst of fine May weather; there were some pretty green hillocks, and on the hillocks some pretty white cottages with their windows wide open, and everything seemed to be at rest.

"What do I see? Some houses on a hill," I replied.

"Look again."

"I have looked again: houses on a hill."

"That is the first reaction," said the Contessina. "But if you concentrate you will get the second reaction. In other words, if you were a painter what would you paint?"

"Cottages on the hill," said I.

"But do you not see," insisted the Contessina, "something else floating in the atmosphere?"

"No, I am sorry, but I don't."

Our artistic guide gave an impatient gesture. He was beginning to be rather annoying.

"Excuse me," said Maioli, "but neither do I see anything but cottages on a hill. . . ."

"That is because you are old," said the artistic guide bluntly. "Your eye is nothing more nor less than a photographic machine; you have no reactions; you do not see the vibrant movements. Those cottages are dancing in a slow rhythm, but still they are dancing; those open windows are exclaiming beatifically, 'Oh, oh, oh!' We must express the dancing and the beatitude. In order to express what this gentleman" (he meant me!) "calls cottages, I should adopt a theory of young girls undulating in rhythm, with wide

open mouths beatifically saying, 'Oh, oh, oh'!"

The Contessina was all enthusiasm.

"And any one," concluded Cioccolani, "who cannot get that reaction is a rhinoceros!" He was talking to Maioli, but I felt that he referred to me. I felt that the time had come to retaliate.

"Yes," said I, "for my part I don't care whether they are cottages or young girls, but it strikes me that you don't know the meaning of the word 'modesty.'"

"Modesty? Ha, ha, ha!" Both he and the Contessina burst out laughing as though they had gone mad. I should like to know what I said to make them laugh like that.

That was how our artistic pilgrimage turned out. Its effect upon the far-sighted mind of Ginetto Sconer has been steadily more profitable. The excursion furnished me with a capital specimen of what my home would be like after it had become the rendezvous of the most distinguished personalities in art and politics.

The following day I made inquiries, with the following result. The old Countess was so generous in her gallantries that she distributed her favors not only to noble cavaliers, but to the household retinue. The old Count, her husband, employed himself in liquidating his

patrimony at Monte Carlo. The son, Desiderio, an officer in the cavalry, would follow if he could in the paternal footsteps. His last hope had been to marry the daughter of a millionaire cheese merchant. But this marriage went up in smoke, because the girl's parents realized that in war times a cavalry officer was likely to be killed, and they did not care for a wedding that involved the prospect of a funeral. There are some people who still have their heads on their shoulders.

There remains the palace, plastered over with mortgages; there remains the blue blood, although many people say that the blue blood of the father must be left out of the reckoning. There remains Grifone, the historic black horse, with his silver trappings, who draws the aged carriage of the aged Countess. As for the Contessina, there are some who claim that she lacks something beside a sum-total of blue blood; others limit themselves to the bar sinister.

Now, however susceptible Ginetto Sconer may be, he still has his head on his shoulders, and his brain between his ears.

"My dear Count," I said to Maioli, "I am sorry; but marriage is not a lyric poem, but a long continued epic. I have taken thought and I refuse." (Exclamations of amazement.) I continued: "I might add that the merchan-

dise does not come up to the specifications.”

(Exclamations of protest.)

“But that is not the reason. You were trying to sell me a clouded title, as the real estate men put it. You talked of blue blood, but you never once hinted that the blue blood is so diluted that there is no telling how much of it is assets and how much liabilities.”

“What a shocking way to talk,” exclaimed Maioli. “You talk to me of assets and liabilities, when I have offered to make you captain of the prettiest craft that ever navigated the feminine ocean!”

“Yes, with a good chance of being torpedoed!”

“You are a man of ice, a cold calculator! But you will be punished! Love concedes its supreme joys only to those who are prepared for the supreme risks. You are a puny soul. You will never be loved, never!”

He turned his back on me. That man is as idiotic as he is dreadful.

CHAPTER X

THE LADY OF THE CARAMELS

I HAVE been resolute, as my habit, regardless of my own sufferings. "Because," I told myself, as I sipped the excellent coffee at the Madalena pastry shop, at half-past-ten in the morning, an hour when the shop is deserted, "I might pass over the Contessina's early indiscretions, but the bar sinister is different. If my heir should be born with a bar sinister of his own, I should have taken out a tremendous mortgage on my entire patrimony, material and moral. No, no, never that! Well, then, let's pack our luggage and go back to Milan."

A pyramid of *marrons glacés* attracted my attention. I helped myself to one and ate it. It made me sad, for it reminded me of the *marron glacé* that had vanished two days ago within the mouth of the Contessina.

So likewise my hopes had vanished! Ah, well, let us honor the dead and remember that one must always be a gentleman! I will pay my homage to the Contessina by sending her a box of *marrons glacés*. "Put me up a box of *marrons*

glacés," I told the confectioner, "with other bonbons, and kindly deliver them to the Contessina Ghiselda." Perhaps it was a rather commonplace sort of gift, but I decided that I would remedy that with a neatly turned note expressing my sentiments.

I was wholly absorbed in the task of distilling my note, when I heard, from the direction of the counter, a confused discussion about caramels, the price of caramels, the scarcity of caramels—and all of a sudden I was struck by the following words:

"Of course I use a great many caramels! Every morning when my husband leaves the house, I put a caramel in his mouth." Who on earth could have uttered these extraordinary words? Who could this prodigious creature be, who every morning put a caramel in her husband's mouth? I raised my eyes and saw a lady conversing with the confectioner; a lady of middle age, but well preserved and quietly dressed. I became quite interested.

The pastry man tied up the package of caramels and consigned it, with an expansive gesture, to the lady, saying:

"And many, many greetings to the counselor . . . (That must be the husband, lucky man!)
" . . . and many greetings also to the Signorina! Tell her besides that if she wants to see

how the quince preserve is made, she must come without hesitation, in September."

That must be the daughter, or one of the daughters! How intuitive I am! If the mother puts a caramel in her husband's mouth, it is fair to assume that the daughter will also put a caramel in her husband's mouth, or something equally sweet.

I am dazed at my discovery. It remains to find out whether this daughter responds equally well to the æsthetic requirements. No sooner had the lady departed than I asked:

"Is the Signora's husband a lawyer that one could have confidence in?"

"You could take him with your eyes shut, just as you can his wife."

"The wife too can be taken with one's eyes shut?"

"If one took her with one's eyes open, one would no longer take her at all." (The pastry makers of this vicinity are quite intelligent.) I asked in reply:

"This daughter of theirs is rather homely, isn't she?"

"On the contrary, a rose-bud!"

"Hardly more than a child, as I remember?"

"She was a child a year ago, but she is grown up now. Young girls grow like the grass, night and day."

“Still, one doesn’t often see her around town, this Signorina Rosebud?”

“The girls that you do see about town aren’t to be trusted,” answered the pastry man, pulling a very wry face.

I obtained further information. The Counselor stands well in his profession. He has his office in his own house, on the Via X——; but he does not live in town excepting in the winter months. Throughout the warm weather he lives with his family in a country place a few miles outside, and comes into town every morning, returning home at night.

Of the wife they could tell me nothing either good or bad. So she must be a worthy sort of woman; because it is only the worthy women of whom people have nothing to say. As for the daughter, she is completely ignored.

“But that is natural, my dear Ginetto,” I told myself. “If the young lady really belongs within the classification of Dr. Pertusius, she is not a rose-bud but a double violet, and double violets bloom in secret.”

I have delayed my departure. Instead of packing my suit-case I shall remain on the spot. Perhaps I have found a wife!

CHAPTER XI

THE DOUBLE VIOLET

IT was a beautiful May-day afternoon, as the novelists put it; so I told Biagino to make a circuit of the suburbs, among the low, green hills, crowned with white cottages with wide open windows. I was bent upon identifying the cottage which belonged to the Lady of the Carmels.

We had reached the foot of a long ascent and I was glancing around me when I heard a sharp whirr of wheels, and saw a bicycle coming down from the top of the hill at a reckless speed, ridden by a young girl sitting very erect. She turned out and flashed past us like a streak. It was she! I could not get a good view of her face, but it must have been she!

Presently, after perhaps a quarter of an hour, I beheld her coming back; but this time she was on foot, and accompanied by a man—her papa.

The dear girl! She had gone to meet her papa! They were approaching together, just the two of them, very slowly, talking so busily that they were not even aware of my automobile

standing in the road. On the other hand I was so ambushed behind my goggles and hat brim that they could not have recognized me again in any case.

I got no better sight of her face this time than I had done before. But judging by her figure she must be charming.

Part of the time she was caressing papa with her long slender hand; part of the time she was dancing on ahead of him, along the road; and then again she hung upon papa's arm, while he wheeled the bicycle with his other hand. How gracefully she moved clinging to papa's arm!

I have since succeeded in identifying the house also—something halfway between a villa and a bungalow; a neat, well-painted fence, a well kept pathway paved with little stones, and bordered with fruit trees trained upon lattices, with here and there big tubs containing lemon trees. On either side is garden space devoted to peas, lettuce and other botanical food.

One morning, quite unexpectedly, I saw the Caramel Lady giving orders to a servant, when, *cluck, cluck, cluck!* here came a superb flock of poultry. There was nothing very high-life in all this; but if you stop to think of it in the true English sense of a *home*, then it really becomes rather fine. At all events, a lady who interests

herself in raising chickens offers a substantial guarantee.

As for the daughter, I learned that she goes every day at the same hour in the afternoon, to meet papa at the point where the trolley ends. Friday is the only day she misses.

About ten o'clock in the morning the maid goes down the road with a basket, to buy provisions at the shops outside the town gate. I have resolved to have a talk with that maid. I shall waylay her at one of the turns of the road.

CHAPTER XII

INTERVIEWING A HANDMAID

THE maid was descending a narrow little lane between two hedges of white hawthorne, bare-headed, with market basket in hand, dancing as she came. She is a florid, robust girl, built on the peasant pattern, but with a certain veneer of citified manners. Thick lips, cheeks suffused with health, not to mention pimples. I crossed over to meet her, and opened as follows:

“I would like a word with you, Signorina. In the house up yonder many queer things are happening. Cries have been heard; signalling with white flags has been seen. Furthermore, every afternoon a young girl is seen rushing headlong down to the trolley station, to keep an appointment with a man in black—every afternoon excepting Friday. Why not Friday? It is very mysterious. You realize that this is war-time?”

The young woman was divided between an impulse to laugh and to take alarm.

“Are you from the police?”

"Let us suppose that I am."

"The screams," said she, "are my young mistress singing."

"So your young mistress sings and plays the piano?"

"She sings without any piano. And the white flags waving are when the week's wash is hung out to dry."

"People send their week's wash to the laundry," said I.

"Oh, but my mistress doesn't; she has the wash done at home. But how many more things do you want to know? If you spent more time catching thieves and less time talking we would all be better off!"

She had me there so I changed my tactics.

"Listen: I am a business man, and I want some confidential information about your master . . . and this is for yourself," so saying I presented her with a crisp ten lire note that set her smiling. She refused the money, however, because she had nothing but good to say of her master, the Counselor.

"That does you honor, but it is a fixed rule that one must never refuse money. So the Signorina sings?"

"Every morning, like a chaffinch."

"Then she is not the melancholy sort?"

"Melancholy? So long as she is alive and

well, what reason should she have for being melancholy?"

"I am glad to hear you say that, because it is my own way of thinking. So the Signorina rises early in the morning?"

'Of course she does, because she goes to bed early at night. But the things you want to know are all about my young mistress, and not at all about my master!"

I praised her perspicacity and begged her to accept a gold piece. I always reward intelligence because it has always proved good business to do so. But I warned her not to exchange it at face value, since gold pieces have become as rare as museum exhibits. Gold, I told her, was a precious metal, because it bought smiles of happiness. At this the maid herself smiled, and seemed disposed to enter into an alliance with me. I asked why her young mistress did not go to meet her father on Fridays. "Was it," I ventured, "because she had a headache?"

"The Signorina never has headaches."

"Perhaps she had a toothache?"

"The Signorina never has a toothache."

"Perhaps she had indigestion?"

The maid assured me that the Signorina never had indigestion. "But what silly questions you ask!"

"Never mind about the questions; just pay

attention to your answers. So the Signorina spends her Fridays reading novels?" Ah, delightful novels, full of romance that sets young hearts abeating!"

The maid admitted that in her former place there was a young lady who was forever reading novels, and who expected her to share in the emotions caused by the reading. But the Signorina Oretta did not read novels.

"So your young mistress is named Oretta?"

"Yes, Oretta."

"Never heard it before, but it's a pretty name. And if she doesn't play the piano, and doesn't read novels, what does she do all day?"

"What does she do, you ask? What does she do? What do we all do all day long? Go ask the Signora! There is never any end at all to the work to be done in that house!"

"Then," said I, "on Fridays, Signorina Oretta is busy writing to her best young man!"

Oh, what a thing for me to have said!—"Although it is true," the maid went on to admit, "that now-a-days young ladies begin talking about their beaux before they have put on long skirts!" But never had she heard the Signorina Oretta utter a word about beaux.

"Will you guarantee that she hasn't any beaux?"

“Why, if she had even a single one, I should be the first to know it.”

“Then why doesn’t she come on Fridays?”

This was a secret, which the maid finally confided to me, after exacting a solemn promise that I would never reveal it to any one. Two years ago the Signora had been very ill; and during her illness, the Signorina had made a vow to the Lord that if her mamma was cured, she would always spend her Fridays in her own room. The Signora was cured, so the Signorina never leaves the house on Fridays.

“So you see, Signor, that is just a silly reason!”

“That is true,” I replied. But it means that the Signorina keeps the terms of her contracts, and that pleases me.”

CHAPTER XIII

A SECOND INTERVIEW WITH THE HANDMAID

THIS Signorina fufills all the exceptional requirements laid down by Dr. Pertusius. She is somewhat primitive; but when transplanted from her rural environment into my garden, the simple flower will bloom like a double rose. While I lay, late in the morning, in the bed where Joseph II and all those other kings once slept, I enjoyed in anticipation the changes which were to be wrought in the simple Oretta by my potent hands; and I could hear her exclaim, "Ginetto, you make me suffer too, too much! Yet it is wrong of you, Ginetto, to be thinking wholly of yourself. There is the heir to be thought of!"

My heir will cry, and do other things that are unæsthetic. And it is expecting too much to demand that Oretta shall be simultaneously sparkling champagne for me and the fount of life for my heir. The birth of an heir being already a settled question; I decided to have another interview with the maid.

This time I went to waylay the maid decked

in all the splendor of a new spring suit. Accordingly when the girl saw me she was bewildered, and hardly recognized me. (On the previous day I had deliberately adopted a disgraceful shabbiness.)

“Oher marvels are in store for you, my child,” said I. “But first of all, tell me your name.”

“Lisetta.”

“Well then, Lisetta, we are on the way to become good friends. But you must prepare to become my collaborator.”

“Whatever do you mean,” she demanded.

“I will explain,” said I.

But in addition to her market-basket Lisetta was carrying a package done up in newspaper, with lacings hanging out. Evidently a pair of shoes. “Your shoes, Lisetta?”

“No, the Signorina’s.”

“Do let me see them.”

I looked at them. The sight of those shoes, although they conformed to the ideas of Dr. Pertusius, drove a thorn into my heart.

“Tell me,” said I, has the Signorina a pretty foot?”

“Like my own,” said Lisetta.

“But in smaller proportions, I trust?”

From the foot I ascended with cautious questions to higher regions; but here Lisetta could give me only vague information. Sure, she

could tell me about the other young ladies, who wore lace chemises that were too thin to cover . . .

"I understand. Go on!"

" . . . And besides they posed like statues in front of the mirror. But Signorina Oretta wears a chemise as long as Saint Veronica's. But anyhow she is a brunette."

"But these shoes are only fit to throw away," said I.

"Throw away? I am taking them to be resoled. Just you go and say 'throw away' to the Signora! Especially to-day, with shoes at the price they are! We don't throw away anything, not even the dish gravy."

"Indeed!"

"No, we keep a pig."

"A useful animal, but unpoetic. A home with chickens is all very well; but when it comes to a pig! . . . "

However, I said: "Listen to me, Lisetta. Supposing there should come one of those absolutely exceptional young men, handsome and rich, such as you read about in novels; a thorough gentleman, who wishes, perhaps, to marry your young mistress, Signorina Oretta. . . ."

"Meaning yourself, maybe," And she looked me straight in the eye.

“Well, why not? Don’t you like me? Do you find anything about me to object to?”

“I think you are a very nice gentleman.”

“You are evidently an intelligent girl.”

“And besides, with such a fine automobile!”

“So you think, Lisetta, that your mistress would be favorably impressed if she were told that a wealthy, likable, serious minded young man was disposed to make her a serious offer of marriage?”

“If I should tell her, she would send me into the kitchen. Every time that I have tried to talk to her about love and lovers, she says to me: ‘Lisetta, go back to the kitchen!’ What you had better do, Signor, is to try to get on the right side of the Signorina’s papa and mamma. What’s more the moment that the Signora learns that you are rich . . .”

“That is an interesting detail. But in order to get on the right side, it is necessary first to get acquainted.”

“Oh, Signor,” exclaimed Lisetta, suddenly clapping her hand to her forehead, “if that is the only thing in the way, you could not have chosen a luckier moment.”

“Be so good as to explain yourself, my child.”

“Have you noticed a tiny, tiny cottage directly opposite our house? It is so hidden by bushes that it can hardly be seen. It has four little

rooms which the Signora has managed to fit up out of her savings, so as to rent them furnished; and it was only day before yesterday that they were left vacant. I won't stop to tell you why; all you need to know is that the Signora lost all the rent, to say nothing of the expenses. For two days she has been almost crazy, she has cried herself sick. Well then, if you present yourself and rent the cottage without asking them to take off a single centesimo on the price, you will be welcomed like a prince."

Excellent idea! In that way I can see the Signorina *wound up and working*, as we say in Milan.

"One question more, please: What sort of a man is the Counselor? He is not at all violent, is he?"

"He is the kindest sort of man," replied Lisetta. "He raises his voice sometimes, but no one minds that."

"If the thing goes through, your fortune is made, my girl, because—keep this in mind—our firm is run on the German system: We pay our people in proportion to what they do."

CHAPTER XIV

MY FUTURE FATHER-IN-LAW

I WENT to the Counselor's office to arrange about renting the cottage. I did not need to inquire whether he was in. His voice could be heard from the outer office. He was screaming like an eagle, a habit of which I had been warned beforehand.

"Pray be seated," said the clerk, a little dwarf whose hands contrasted blackly against the white paper on which he was writing.

As a matter of fact whenever I hear people raising their voices rather high, it is my habit to take my leave. The office was very much in keeping with the hands of the clerk. Pray sit down? But where? The sofa was occupied by two stout individuals of the peasant type. His clients seemed to lack distinction.

The declamatory noises grew in volume. One could hear the Counselor saying, "Dirty business, gentlemen, very dirty business! In my office everything is clean."

A pause. Then the voice continued: "By

all means, go to whomever you please! There are more lawyers than anything else!"

"Just listen to him!" said the two peasants, filled with admiration.

"No!" came in a new outburst from the other room. "There is no use in trying to grease my palm. And let me tell you something more, you ought to be thankful that I don't report you. Be so kind as to get out of my office, get out!"

The door was flung open and a rather pale looking gentleman came out. As he passed he noticed my distinguished personality and he said, "I brought him a case that involved thousands, and he tells me that it would dishonor him. Just as though thousand lire notes were issued with or without a guarantee of honor! War ends, but business goes on just the same."

It wasn't bad reasoning, but I remained unresponsive. The peasants on the contrary stared at him wide-eyed: *What was he driving at?* The man passed out.

The Counselor came to the door with a face like a storm cloud and said, "Come in, whoever's next!" The two peasants went in. My future father-in-law lacks polish.

"Is your chief always like that with clients?" I asked the clerk.

"Only when they get on his nerves," and the

little hunchback amiably gave me the details of the quarrel: It was a question of salvaging a German firm that ought to have been seized by the authorities.

"So your chief carries his patriotism even into his business?"

"Let me tell you," said the hunchback, "he is one who is working for the greater glory of Italy."

The peasants came out, and I went in. We sat down, with our faces on the same level and quite close to each other. He stared at me with a truculent air; but I conquered him with my habitual correct manner. I opened up my business with my accustomed polished and persuasive phrases. His face cleared; indeed, my aspect of a perfect gentleman must have caused him some slight self-reproach. "But see here," said he, "that cottage hasn't all the conveniences that you may require. I should be sorry to have you complain later."

I made a gesture of complete reassurance. Then he asked me with some hesitation, "Have you any local references?"

I might have mentioned the name of my firm; but I merely said,

"Signor Maioli."

"A dignified old imbecile," said he.

"I quite agree with you." (But that is not

the way to speak of imbeciles, my good Counselor! I always mention them with much respect.)

“Signor Cioccolani.”

“Father or son?”

“Son,” I replied. “Why, does it make any difference?”

“Indeed it does: the father is a fine man and an admirable agriculturalist; the son is his greatest cross. Such sons are the heaviest disappointments that we parents can have.”

“Have you, too, a son who is a poet?”

“Fortunately, not. I have only a daughter.” I saw that he had something further to ask me; and presently he asked it:

“Excuse my asking: but is the cottage for yourself? You get my meaning?”

I highly approved of his scruples. Morality above all things. “The cottage,” said I, “is for my mother, who at present is taking the cure at Salsomaggiore, and will afterwards have need of balsamic air and perfect quiet.” (Eventually I will bring my housekeeper, camouflaged as my maternal parent.)

“For that purpose,” said the Counselor, “you could not have made a better choice.”

We parted in perfect accord. He is a type very different from my own, but a fine man, just the same, the good Counselor. A healthy

looking, wiry person, with a musketeer's mustache; altogether an impressive personality. I am much pleased; we shall conserve all the energy of both stocks for the heir. All right! Worthy Counselor, with the collaboration of your daughter, we will bring into the world a healthy, orderly, methodical heir, for the greater glory of Italy!

CHAPTER XV

ATTILA, KING OF THE HUNS

EXTRAORDINARY coincidence! As I left the Counselor's office, whom should I meet on the Corso but the Contessina and her mother. She was ravishing! She was triumphal! She carried a slender walking stick, wore tall waving plumes, and looked like an understudy of La Tosca. In the shadow of her splendor the poet Cioccolani in gleaming boots, trotted along, like a pet dog on a leash. Like myself he was arrayed in a new spring suit.

It was the Contessina who first stopped me, to thank me for the *marrons glacés*, and for my lovely madrigal. "But please put your hat on."

I had remained with my head scrupulously uncovered, to the great admiration of the good provincials, and it was only at her command that I replaced my tall silk hat on my glossy and well brushed hair.

"But is it possible that you two don't know each other?" demanded the Contessina.

“Suahly, suahly,” murmured the poet Ciocolani. He habitually slurred his *r*’s.

“No one would have guessed it?” said I.

The Contessina apologized for him, explaining that he was subject to incredible absorption. The poet was certainly a wonder at putting things over.

“With your permission, Contessina, I must make you a second madrigal; your presence illuminates these mediæval streets with modern vibrations. The Town Council ought at least to give you a diploma as public benefactor.” At this compliment the Contessina burst into a series of “Ha-ha-ha’s!” so shrill that the people turned round to stare at her. But she continued to laugh to a finish. When she had finished, she said:

“The Town Council? The socialistic Town Council here in P——?” If it dared, it would be my finish. Isn’t that so, Ciocolani?”

“The fate of Jeanne d’Arc,” said the poet.

“*Je m’en fiche*,” said the Contessina.

The Countess Mother, who had caught a word here and there, insisted upon having my madrigal shouted into her ear, and highly approved of it. She informed me personally that in the middle ages her ancestors walked the streets of P—— as if they were their feudal property.

We stopped at the accustomed pastry shop. The old Countess ordered a *mélange* with a great deal of milk, a great deal of chocolate, a great deal of sugar, and a great many little cakes. The Contessina took an iced tea, very much *frappé*. The poet took nothing but an ice.

I have sometimes employed a poet to write verses for my advertisements. He was a spectral man, who drank inflammable liquids. For that matter, it is notorious that poets subsist upon stimulants. I expressed this opinion, but it was not well received.

"No, no, no, never liquors !" exclaimed the Contessina. "Precisely the contrary. Especially now when Cioccolani is in a state of grace and martyrdom, it would be fatal if he took stimulants."

I inquired if Signor Cioccolani was in bad health.

"He is creating," said the Contessina. I allowed myself to inquire what it was that he was creating. Cioccolani stiffened but did not answer.

"A dramatic poem," the Contessina answered for him.

"In prose or in verse?" I inquired. The poet made a wry face of disgust.

“Out of date! In lyric prose,” said the Contessina.

“That’s fine,” said I. “And what is it to be called?”

“The *Attilaid*, or *Attila King of the Huns or the Racial Struggle*.”

“Just the same as it is to-day,” said I.

“Listen to that!” exclaimed the Contessina. “Do you see, Cioccolani, even he understands!” (*Even he means me!*) “Tell him, tell him, Cioccolani, how many people are to be in the play.”

“More than three hundred,” said Cioccolani. “Huns in leopard-skins, mitred bishops, Nazarenes with unshorn locks, the last of the Roman legionaries, the virgins of St. Genevieve. The tragedy unfolds in three great settings; the first in Aquileia, the second on the fields of Catalonia, the third in a cathedral in Pannonia. Honestly, Donna Ghiselda, I shall be obliged to make at least one trip to Aquileia, to make some archæological studies; but at present the military authorities raise so many difficulties. . . .”

“Excuse me,” I allowed myself to observe, “but it strikes me that Attila King of the Huns is hardly a sympathetic character.”

The poet made no answer; but the Contes-

sina said indignantly: "Attila not sympathetic? Ah! The magnificent genius of the race, the sublime purifier!"

I took the liberty of admitting that I did not understand.

"It is simple," replied the Contessina. "Attila is the Nemesis that purifies humanity by extermination."

"I am sorry, but I cannot agree with that view."

"War, my dear sir," said Cioccolani, "is nothing else than the catharsis of purification, the holocaust offered to the obscure geniuses of the race." Hereupon the poet suddenly changed his tone: "Waiter, waiter, come here! This is insufferable!" He had found something black in his water ice. "What is this in the water ice? Look at it!" And he exhibited the black object to the waiter, on the tip of his teaspoon.

It was a fly!

Debate as to whether it really was a fly. The fact that it was a fly was finally established. The Countess Mother, who by this time had consumed half the basket of cake, woke up and insisted upon seeing for herself: "Horrors! A fly!"

There followed a dispute with the waiter as to whether the fly had fallen into the ice then and there, or whether it had got in during the

making. The Countess Mother insisted on taking part in the discussion, and said mysteriously, "Nowadays the working class deliberately put filth into the food that is meant for the upper classes."

Then followed another dispute as to whether it was this waiter or some other who had brought the ice. "Do you imagine," said Cioccolani, that I ever look in any of your faces, to see which waiter is serving me? But I did find a fly. Don't you know, you idiot, how many millions of microbes are hidden under the wing of a fly?"

There was much in what he said; but it occurred to me that the simplest solution was to order another water ice; and thus the danger from the fly was eliminated.

"War," resumed Cioccolani, thrusting the bowl of his spoon into the ice, "war is always a process of purification."

"That is all very fine. But with your permission, Signor Cioccolani, I allowed myself to observe, "I fear that this tragedy of yours cannot have a great success to-day. A few years ago Germany was in favor, and anything German went well. But nowadays! . . . Remember that only this past winter, a satire against Germany was brought out, in Milan, with a title much resembling yours. . . ." (But what in the

world should make them both laugh in my face, while I was speaking?)

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Cioccolani.

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the Contessina.

I felt as though they had laughed behind my back. When they had finished laughing, the Contessina explained: “But in Cioccolani’s play it is not Attila who conquers. The conqueror is Rome—that is, the genius of the Latin people.”

“Ah, that alters the matter!”

“The tragedy is immensely powerful,” the Contessina went on to explain. “You know, when Attila appeared before Aquileia, mounted on his horse, beneath whose hoofs no blade of grass could ever grow, things looked very serious.”

“I can well believe it.”

“The Christians, after a few centuries of pacifist preaching, had demobilized the army of Roman legions; but the coming of Attila had recalled the Pope to the realms of reality. Yet what was the Pope to do? Mobilize! But mobilize what, since there was no army left? Thereupon, according to a legend that is still popular to-day, he appealed to St. Peter and St. Paul. But what help could he expect St. Peter and St. Paul to give? The Christian legend says that St. Peter and St. Paul halted Attila.

That is absurd; Attila symbolizes the principle that is antithetic to Christ: the one explains the other, nothing more! Attila, so long as he can, goes forward and not backward. You can perfectly understand that the day when Attila consents to become a monk, history stops like a clock that has run its course. Do you follow me, Signor Sconer?"

In point of fact I was following her, though with some bewilderment.

"No! It was not the Pope with his ideology," continued the Contessina, "who stopped Attila; it was a sublime woman, St. Genevieve, who cleft the head of Attila with a club, and then Attila suddenly understood and halted."

"Which means," said I, "that, in order to convince the Germans, there is only one method; to split their heads."

"Yes! yes! yes! Do you see, Cioccolani? Even he understands. Even the vulgar crowd will understand!" ("Even he" means me, every time. It was far from flattering.)

"Tell me, Contessina," I demanded, "did Attila really die like that?"

"Attila really died in a shameless debauch in Pannonia; but Cioccolani is the first to derive from this commonplace occurrence a lofty symbolic significance."

Cioccolani was deeply moved, although he

said nothing. I offered him my congratulations.

"Will your drama be brought out in Milan?"

"In Milan?" repeated Cioccolani, breaking his silence. "My drama must be presented nowhere but at Rome, the center of Latinity."

"It is a play," said the Contessina, "that is destined to stir the soul of the Roman populace."

"I imagine," I ventured to object, "that it would be a difficult thing to thrill the Romans."

"Art can do all things!"

"Then there is nothing further to say."

At this point Cioccolani glanced at his wrist-watch and said: "It is eleven o'clock, mass has already begun. Are you coming, *Basilissa*?"

"No, I am sorry, but mamma is so feeble." (She had emptied my whole basket of cake, and yet they call her feeble!)

The poet left us.

"Signor Cioccolani must be very religious," I remarked.

"To tell the truth," replied the Contessina, "Cioccolani goes to hear high mass to get inspiration for the third act of his 'Attiliad.' You see, Sconer, high mass contains lyric and dramatic elements of the highest order which react upon the crowd. The crowd does not understand, but it is moved by the force of its lyric suggestion. Cioccolani's verses are like high mass: they are not verses, they are lyric bridges,

over which the crowd must pass. It must pass! A panic frenzy, a Dionysiac fury takes possession of the crowd, and it passes wheresoever the poet wills."

Here the Contessina paused, stared at me wild-eyed, and then continued: "Ah! You—but why do I say you? Neither you nor any one can understand the inner tragedy that is evolving in the soul of Cioccolani and in mine as well!"

I didn't understand; and she must have seen that I didn't because she asked me:

"Have you read Cioccolani's 'Hermetic Songs'?"

"I am sorry to say . . ."

"It was his first lyric utterance. His brain is pure radium!" (At a million a gram!)

"Well, the 'Hermetic Songs' passed unnoticed in Italy. Italy ignores Cioccolani! But he is not ignored in Germany: in a *Geschichte der jungen futuristischen italienischen Literatur* Cioccolani is enrolled among the most audacious warriors, *die tapfersten Soldaten*, who ever shattered the marble sepulcher of tradition. You can readily understand that if it were only for this Cioccolani owes a debt of gratitude to Germany!"

"Excuse me, Contessina, I too have always been on excellent terms with the German busi-

ness houses, but I always think of them as a race of butchers."

"That is characteristic of all great peoples," she replied indifferently.

I watched her face with ever growing amazement. As she talked she took her cup of tea in her hand; greedily she poured its entire contents down her throat. I heard a gurgling. She passed the tip of her tongue across her lips. Tea, liquor, blood: I realized that this woman was avid of sensations.

"Besides," she resumed, "we like Germany, Cioccolani and I! we envy (of course, I trust you not to repeat this) their incomparable soldiers, statesmen and scientists who have enrolled all the expatriots of the world in the service of the one and only fatherland—Germany! Well, we have sacrificed our personal sentiments, Ciccolani and I; we are at the service of Italy, at the service of the present democracy which is a rule of incompetence. This is our tragedy! But what else can we do? We are of the nobility, and it is our duty to sacrifice ourselves."

It is strange! But even with a methodical and orderly brain like mine, I began to have a sense of vertigo. I promptly started to take my leave.

"Are you returning to Milan?" she asked.

I told the Contessina that I had rented a small cottage for my mother.

“I will bring Cioccolani to call some evening, and will have him read his ‘Hermetic Songs’ to you.”

“May I ask, Contessina, what does the name, *Basilissa*, mean that I heard Cioccolani call you?”

“It is a Byzantine word, and it means *Queen*.”

At last I am alone. I am trying to find my own soul. Oh, poor Ginetto Sconer! And to think that I came near marrying such an educated woman. I certainly should have ended up in a lunatic asylum.

CHAPTER XVI

DOGS AND CATS

ON the twenty-sixth day of May I took possession of the cotttage. I found mother, daughter and serving maid still hard at work at putting things in order. My arrival, arrayed with all the care a gentleman owes himself, caused them some slight embarrassment.

"We are sorry to have you find us like this," said the mother, "but the last tenants left the house in a dreadful state!" Thereupon she proceeded to point out the disposition of the rooms; but what concerned me was her own disposition toward myself. I seemed to have made a good start. I will even say that if I had chosen to start a flirtation and had not been obliged to look upon her as my future mother-in-law, I would have wagered that hers was not one of the cases of definitely established conjugal fidelity.

"This room," she told me, "the largest one, we will reserve for your mother."

"Excellent idea," said I.

"And now, Oretta, my child, give the gentle-

man the inventory. Are you sure you have entered everything very carefully? It is just to have everything quite business-like. . . . You can verify it if you wish."

I was impressed by her business efficiency, but I held out my gloved hand in protest: "Quite unnecessary," said I. Hereupon for the first time I heard the sound of Signorina Oretta's voice:

"Yes, mamma," and she took from the pocket of her apron a folded sheet and handed it to me—it was headed "List of Household Objects Consigned Today, May 26, to Signor ——"

"I had to leave out your name, because I didn't know it."

"Cavaliere Ginetto Sconer."

She was quite mortified.

My keen glance passed over the list of household objects, glasses, plates, table service, to the list of her features: hair, nose, mouth, and so forth. But she did not sustain my examination very long; her eyes must be of the kind recommended by Dr. Pertusius, because all at once they became troubled, and she said:

"Please excuse it if it isn't well written. . . ."

"Oh, it's admirably written: glasses, plates, table service."

Certainly it is not the vigorous handwriting affected by young women of the fashionable

world; it is a fine, dainty handwriting like herself, and her voice too is like her, a gentle sing-song with a touch of provincialism. Her features are regular, almost too much so, because they have none of those decorative motives on which one's desires may center. They are so even that one's desire glides over and past them. There is nothing special about her eyes; they are simply just two eyes! Her figure shows no visible fullness; but that will improve in time, because the mother justifies the most promising hopes. On the other hand, her hair is quite remarkable; it is a nubian black. If it was not drawn so tightly and smoothly back it could be dressed with extraordinary effectiveness.

"Much must be done," I found myself thinking, "to raise you to the height of the occasion on the happy day when you too, Signorina Oretta, charming household object, shall be regularly consigned to the care of Cavalier Ginetto Sconer!"—but at that point in my meditations I became aware of something behind me nosing at my heels.

"Bless me, what is that?" said I, making a backward leap.

A huge head was taking liberties with my trousers. It was a dog of colossal proportions.

"Oh, he won't hurt you, Signor. Leone, Leone, come here."

So the dog belonged to her! Really I never would have supposed that she was the kind of girl who would be fond of dogs!

"Isn't the animal rather dangerous?"

"Oh, no, he is so good, so intelligent! Leone, look at the gentleman! Remember, Leone, that you must always be very polite to him!"

Signorina Oretta talked very prettily to her dog, and she smiled while she talked. But the fact remained that it was my alarm which first made her laugh. The beast did not impress me as being amiable. The unpleasant episode, however, afforded me an opportunity to observe that the young lady is possessed of a magnificent set of teeth, and when she laughs her eyes close and her mouth opens.

Mother and daughter departed with the dog, Leone, following close at his mistress' heels. The maid remained and accompanied me through a closer inspection of my new habitation. It is quite rural. Moreover the bathroom was in what I may call a distinctly primitive state.

"You should know, my child," said I, "that the bathroom is the distinguishing mark of a people's standard of civilization. In my own apartment house in Milan I have two bathrooms

in each apartment; one for the family, the other for the servants. . . ." But my remarks set the maid off in a fit of uncontrollable merriment: "As if it made any difference!" she said.

"You must not laugh like that in the presence of Ginetto Sconer!"

But she went on laughing just the same. "You'd better be thankful you find the house looking as well as it does! Three whole days we've worked on it! I can tell you, bathroom or parlor, it was all the same thing to the last tenants! And look at the garden, where we had planted so many pretty flowers, see the state they have left it in! There were four wild little devils of children who, just because there's a war going on, ruined everything playing they were Germans!"

I have slept in my new habitation. The bed is somewhat battered and the sheets rather coarse; but they give forth a freshly laundered odor that is reassuring. I kept one ear on the alert for mosquitos. For I contend that it is absolutely indecent that a man should serve as a cask of blood, at the disposal of a wretched little beast that comes and goes all night and circles round and round with his interminable buzzing! But having heard no mosquitos, I promptly fell asleep.

The night passed tranquilly, but suddenly in

the morning, in the midst of the very best sleep of all, I was wakened by a cat. The miauling could not be described; it had to be heard! And then, lo and behold! it came into the room with its tail straight up, a scrawny beast, with two wide eyes and mouth wide open, coming right at me! This place is certainly a menagerie! "Miow, miow!"—"What do you want? Go away!" Plague take it! "Now it's in my bed!"

A dreadful idea occurred to me: perhaps the cat had gone mad!" I threw myself out of bed, amply armored in the bedding, and with my brass candlestick for a weapon. I succeeded in driving out the cat, and barricading the door, after which I went to sleep again.

Later in the morning Lisetta arrived and said, "It's such a sunny day!" Then I told her my adventure with the cat.

"It's a she-cat; a present from our last tenants. Poor thing! There was nothing left to eat in the house, and she was half starved."

"But you ought to have driven the wretched beast away. Deuce take it! I'll feed her on a strychnine pill."

"Oh, never do that, Signore! Don't you know that it brings bad luck to kill a nursing cat?"

"A nursing cat?"

"It is the month of May, and the cat has had kittens. Here is your breakfast."

Lisetta also had a cup of broth for the cat.

"Are you so tender-hearted about animals?"

"No, it's the Signorina."

Lisetta was putting my room in order. It struck me that she was accustomed to a very summary sort of house-cleaning; mainly dry-cleaning, so to speak. Ah, my own furnishings, my polished parquet floors, odorous with turpentine!

"No, no. Let those things alone. I'll put them in order myself. Don't disturb them, they are my toilet articles."

"What a lot of them!" she exclaimed. "What is the little box for?"

"Nail-polish."

"And what is this thing?"

"That is the polisher. The care of the nails," I said meaningly, "is a mark of personal respectability."

"Oh, look at the pretty little scissors!"

"Let them alone! They wouldn't do for your hands."

All at once she discovered the use of the atomizer, and began to work the bulb with much enjoyment: "How nice it smells!"

"Help yourself, my good girl. But before using perfumes, the daily ablutions are indispensable. So instead of examining my toilet

articles, supposing you bring me some water.”

“There’s the bowl and pitcher.”

“I want more water, a great deal more water.”

“That means you want to take a bath?”

“If I can manage it: *à la guerre comme à la guerre.*” You, Lisetta—and you are probably not alone—cannot imagine the joy of a bath. A friend of mine who, for the sake of economy, had to spend several weeks at Regina Coeli, told me confidentially that his greatest privation had been his inability to take his morning bath.

Lisetta returned after some delay, bearing two pails filled to the brim.

“The water is in the bottom of the well, and the well is deep,” she said.

“Ah, poor Lisetta! But let us speak of other things. Have you any news to give me as to the effect that my personality produced yesterday?”

Lisetta assured me that I had made a very deep impression, because the Signorina had ordered her to be extra careful in cleaning up.

“And did she say nothing in particular?”

“She said, ‘when you go to the Signore’s cottage, put on your white apron.’”

“Do you see, Lisetta? Your young mistress has forestalled what I was going to tell you. Take my word for it; in a pretty little white

apron with your hair somewhat tidied up, and surmounted by a white cap; with short sleeves and a liberal application of soap to your arms and hands, you would produce an entirely different effect."

"A servant's livery?" exclaimed Lisetta. "Ah, never!"

"Sheer prejudice, my child. Who is there who doesn't wear some sort of livery? Even I sometimes have to wear an evening coat: the simplest of garments, which puts me on a level with a minister, with the Pope, with the King or with any one else."

She departed at last, and I stood before the mirror putting the last touches to my toilet, and clad in simple garb of sane democracy, when the sound of a voice made me jump. It was Lisetta again. Really she was becoming a nuisance.

"Ah, what an extraordinary man you are, Signore!"

"Why?"

"Because I never saw any one tie a cravat so well. You take hold of it and just give it two or three very careful little twists, this way and that, exactly as though you were dressing a baby."

"The way one wears a cravat is the true hallmark of distinction. Have you ever seen cra-

vats like these? Without a lining, my dear girl, and all pure silk. The pure silk cravat has an atmosphere of its own. And have you ever seen such shirts as these?"

"Ah, Signor! Even your shirts are all silk! And are these studs real diamonds? Never in my life have I seen a gentleman like you!"

CHAPTER XVII

AND OTHER ANIMALS

THE Counselor came to see me, to find out if I had need of anything. We reciprocally embarrassed each other: I with my habitual composure, and he with that musketeer's mustache. He was amazed at seeing that I had already received my morning's mail, when he himself was constantly making complaints.

"Complaints are no good," said I. "Try the Turkish system of a little bakshish on the post office, and you will be punctually served."

We passed on to an inspection of the house.

"Look at the state they have left this poor house in!" he exclaimed. "The kitchen will certainly have to have a new coat of white-wash."

He told me the details of the painful story: The tenants who preceded me had departed at night, noiselessly and stealthily, like an Arab camp that folds its tent, and naturally without paying.

"Too bad," said I.

He went on to tell me that the cottage had

been rented at a reduced price in view of the family's financial circumstances.

"Worse yet!" I repeated.

"I would never have thought it of them."

"Worst of all!" said I. He gazed at me in bewilderment. But I also was bewildered. What was the use of being a lawyer, and having a mustache like a musketeer, if one didn't know that offering concessions was equivalent to making enemies? My "too bad!" was intended to say all this. I contented myself with asking if by good luck his own place contained a garage for my automobile.

"You have an automobile?"

"Of course." It was curious and it was flattering: for these small-town folk, to hear me say "my automobile" was equivalent to hearing me say "I am a Count." And later, when the pebbles of the driveway crunched under the tires of my limousine, I was aware that I had made a profound impression.

The Counselor had made hot haste to clear out a small coach house, into which my automobile barely squeezed its way. I saw the Signora's eyes fairly protrude, while the corners of her mouth went down; and the Counselor said: "By thunder!"

Even the Signorina Oretta opened her eyes at the automobile. "Isn't it beautiful, papa?"

"Eighteen to twenty-four horse-power, Signorina;" said I, "new model, automatic starter, electric lighting."

The Signora asked me how I had slept. I was on the point of answering, "The bed is dreadfully hard," but instead I substituted the story of the cat.

"Think of it," said the Counselor, "they took everything else away with them, and left us their cats."

"But Counselor," I suggested, "you can avail yourself of Article 1950 of the Code, or something of the sort."

"Splendid!" said the Signora emphatically. "Do you see that Signor Sconer tells you the same thing? The wretches! After all that we had done for them, even to putting coal in the kitchen! And the amount of damage they did! The bed-springs were brand new. And what do you suppose they did to them? The children jumped up and down on them."

Here Signorina Oretta interrupted, "But, papa, he wrote to tell you he was going to pay."

"I am sorry, Signorina," said I, "but 'going to pay' isn't enough. Any one can say 'I am going to pay.' What one should say is 'I pay.' Signorina."

“Do you hear, daughter,” said mamma, “how sensibly the Signore speaks?”

I had spoken with my most amiable smile; nevertheless, I had caused embarrassment. Signorina Oretta was so confused that she did not answer.

The Signora and I are on the best of terms, better than ever after I had paid the rent promptly and without discussion. It was she who did the talking. She became confidential with me. The socialistic town government is a nightmare to her, an ogre that is devouring her home, slowly consuming it with increased taxes.

“Signora,” I replied, “there is only one remedy. While they undermine on their side let us undermine on ours.”

She failed to understand my elegantly turned phrase. She merely said that she would have my kitchen white-washed.

It is idyllic! The family itself is idyllic; I even find myself becoming idyllic. They dine during the summer season under the pergola. When evening comes they light a large acetylene lamp. The Signorina does the serving, brings the platters, rises, comes and goes, and finds the matches, those confounded matches that the Counselor never remembers where he put.

They often invite me to take coffee with them. The Signorina herself hands me the coffee together with one of their best napkins.

"Oh, what fine embroidery! Some of your own work, I will wager."

"On the contrary, I did them," said the Lady of the Caramels.

I expressed the greatest admiration. A fine family, but very simple in their ways.

The other day we visited the orchard and garden with the dog, Leone, closing the line of march. Pears and peaches are the Signora's chief ambition. But worms within and thieves without constitute a perennial menace, like the socialistic government.

"Nothing is safe any longer! Here are these peaches that are already nearly ripe in June, see how big they are, and so good!" She has even got them all counted! "But Leone is ready to take care of the thieves."

I spoke of Switzerland where peaches can hang over the heads of the passers-by without any one touching them.

"That must be a worth-while country! But around here no one has any respect for other people's things!"

We also stopped to visit the pig, whose acquaintance I had already made. The Signora told me, "Every year we kill a pig for Christ-

mas, because, as you will understand, if everything had to be bought at the shop there would be no end to it, with ham to-day selling at 90 centesimi the hecto. Just think of it! We make all our sausages at home, *salamini*, *ciccioli*, *finocchiate* and *budino dolce*, fresh blood pudding."

The pig, half pink and half white, and still in the bloom of youth, waddled forth boldly, unaware of the things that were being said regarding him. The dog sniffed at him with good-natured tolerance.

"It is an English hog, a Yorkshire," said the Counselor.

"Fine, isn't he?" said the Signora, "Look at those hams!"

It dawned upon me that there was a certain kinship pervading the whole menagerie. I looked again at Oretta, who eats *ciccioli* and *salamini*. Perhaps this marriage would be a *mésalliance*.

It is only the dog, Leone, who is not idyllic, worse than that, he is unendurable. Every time that I enter the gate of the Counselor's home, he acts as though he saw me for the first time; he bars my path with tremendous leaps and with expressions of evil augury. Signorina Oretta promptly runs out. "Don't be afraid, Signor Cavaliere. He is only playing. Haven't

I told you, big stupid, that the Signore is a friend?"

"I think, Signorina," I suggested, "that it would be just as well to repeat the introduction. He has a forbidding expression."

"He is so intelligent! Leone, quick, give your paw to the Signore."

But the beast refuses.

"Isn't he obstinate?"

"That is natural," says the Counselor, smiling. "He is a shepherd dog of pure German breed."

"Papa, I beg of you! You know I hate that! You are an Italian dog, aren't you Leone?"

The dog Leone shakes his head sportively, insisting on his nationality. Signorina Oretta engages in a hand-to-hand struggle with the beast. She is very charming.

The dog is finally vanquished and subsides, while I look on. Signorina Oretta's pretty head, with the hair somewhat dishevelled, seems to me more seductive than ever; her eyes shine unexpectedly, as though a flame were suddenly kindled within them.

"My daughter! My little flower of spring!" said the Counselor, half sighing.

"Mine too," thought I.

I am discovering decorative motives in Signorina Oretta herself. Her little nose rests

upon the corbels of two dainty traceries. On her nose, quite high up is a mole, which is not noticed at first and is not a blemish, being partly hidden by the eyebrow. Her cheeks are covered with a fine down, like a peach. Her mouth is traced in strong color, and when she smiles, two saucy little quirks form at the corners. The aperture of the lips does not completely close; they part sufficiently to show the pretty rows of teeth. Between those half parted lips I have never caught so much as a glimpse of the tip of her tongue. But I realize that from them must always come that gentle voice always uttering very charming but rather stupid things. However, she pleases me, and I declare myself satisfied.

The other morning I was leaving early for Milan, and just as I stepped into the automobile, the Signorina asked me how my mother was.

"In the best of health, Signorina. Would you like to come along to Milan?"

"Yes, if papa and mamma could go too."

Get aboard little children, there is room for plenty more. She is certainly a dear girl! Purity, whatever Lionello says, is an article that will always take.

I am back in my apartment in Milan. Curious! But it seems to me deserted. It gives the impression of being covered with dust,—

an impossible occurrence, and rank injustice to my housekeeper. All the same, it gives me a queer sensation. . . . No, it is not dust; it is the lack of sunshine. And yet we have sunshine in Milan! But presently by an effort of imagination I transplant hither Signorina Oretta, now become Signora Oretta, and at once it seems to me as though a fountain of champagne was scattering its delicious effervescence about me.

CHAPTER XVIII

ORETTA OR GHISELDA?

DO I really like little Signorina Oretta? That is a question which I cannot solve with the precision that belongs to my system. I am a moral man. Little Oretta is a fruit ripening on the tree of life. As part of my rural idyl I find delight in contemplating her. But now that I am back in Milan, she no longer seems quite what I want. The idea of poor Signorina Oretta hemmed in by the confines of an inner court yard, makes me rather uncomfortable. Go slow, Ginetto, before you decide to marry her. No doubt, if I install Signorina Oretta in my apartment, I shall transport the rural idyl to Milan. And that is hygienic. How charmingly she embraced that big brute of a dog back yonder! When is she going to embrace me just as charmingly here? And those pretty eyes of hers! Serene as two Alpine lakes. The clouds of perturbing desires have not yet cast their shadows upon that serenity. She is a dear girl. I should very much like to kiss her. I can picture her, installed here, as my wife, tranquil as a little lamb. I arrive

home from my office, approach softly, on tiptoe, and barely brush the back of her neck with the lightest of kisses. "Ginetto, is that you?"—"Yes, it is I." And she will pay me back with the chastest of kisses. Yet I fear that, at least just at first, she will feel rather out of place in my drawing room. I cannot picture Oretta to myself in a reception toilet. Oretta is a modest little craft, meant only to coast along the shore. But lo and behold! Along comes the Contessina Ghiselda, like a big battle ship, and scuttles my modest little coasting craft. I shall never marry her, but it is none the less true that that lady appeals to my imagination. It is not only Signorina Oretta, but all the other women who are scuttled when the Contessina crosses their wake.

I don't wish to imply that the Contessina neglects to bathe; but there is no doubt that she is different from other fashionable women. What perfume does she use? That I don't know. And yet I think that I understand. . . . The perfume of nature! Other fashionable women are too much bathed, too much perfumed and powdered—I say this, even against my own interests! They are like certain cutlets that are so well prepared that no one can tell what kind of meat they are!

I also picture the Contessina Ghiselda in my

drawing room, and she too fails to fit in, though for a different reason. And then I ask myself, supposing she should expend in love the enthusiasm that she now expends on literature, where would it lead us to? "Faster! faster!" as she said that day when she waved her bunch of roses like a whip. We should probably land up in Vega! No, no! I will marry Oretta, little country song-bird, tender idyl transported to Milan. Sing, Oretta, to your Ginetto, with your sweet, flute-like voice, your quaint, old-fashioned song!

An idea suddenly flashed upon me. I rang, and Desdemona appeared.

"Desdemona," said I, "even if you are not a top-notch chef, at least you have good taste. If I should arrive home some day with a number of strangers, I want you to prepare a dinner with all the side-shows and rules. I am especially particular about the glasses and the silver jardinière full of flowers. The concierge must put on his evening coat and gloves and wait on the table. But it must all have the air of being customary, the every-day routine."

I have made up my mind. I will take the whole family on board my limousine and transport them to Milan, set the Signorina Oretta in the center of my drawing room and, so to speak, try her out. Then I can see how well she fits in.

CHAPTER XIX

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S OPINIONS

THE first thing I did, upon returning to P—— was to divulge to the Counselor my program for a fine trip to Milan by automobile. "Signorina Oretta doesn't know Milan at all, does she?" I inquired. "That is all wrong, you know!"

Papa was enthusiastic over the prospect of an automobile trip. But Oretta said they would have to consult mamma.

"By all means, let us consult mamma.

We proceeded to consult mamma; but here we encountered an opposition that I would never have suspected.

"To Milan? What is there for us to do in Milan?"

"What is there to do in Milan? Why, see Milan, of course!"

"What, take my child around Milan, and let her see those painted women, who look like the masks they used to show in the shop windows, at Carnival time? The last time I was in Milan, I told my husband, 'Let's get away from

here, for I begin to feel like a disreputable woman myself."

I praised her high moral attitude, but argued that it was a question of obtaining the quintessence, the super refinement of beauty; that it was a democratic conception, after all: Equal beauty for all women! "Believe me, Signora, that underneath all the quintessence and super-refinement, there is a great deal of solid respectability."

"That may be," returned the Lady of the Caramels, "but when a woman paints her face, she always has some ulterior purpose! When I was young, I was not such a bad looking woman, but just as true as that my husband fell in love with me, I never was guilty of touching up my face."

"Signora," said I gravely, "you not only were, but still are, a very beautiful woman!"

She was flattered, but I could not persuade her.

"And to see young girls," she continued, "girls of the age of my Oretta all dolled up, and with their faces so made-up that there is no telling whether they are girls or what they are! And with skirts that show their legs all the way up!"

"They are very pretty," said I.

"They are indecent!" said she.

"Signora," said I, "if you frequent the drawing rooms of our best society, you will find that the hostess permits a liberal display of the chief attractions of the gentle sex. It is only normal."

"That is because you men are all perverted."

The Counselor said nothing, but merely pulled at his mustache. Oretta preserved a decorous silence. I felt that it would be interesting to know whether the worthy Counselor shared my opinion or that of his wife.

"Counselor," said I, "defend our cause."

"Well, really" . . . began the Counselor.

"No, no, no!" interrupted Madam Caramel. 'After those three *no's* it can readily be understood that a *yes* would not have been permissible.

CHAPTER XX

I GAIN A MORE INTIMATE FOOTING

“**B**UT for your part, Signorina,” I suggested, “you would have been very glad to go to Milan. Paris in miniature—see something of the world at large. . . .”

“But mamma said no.”

“Of course, always obey papa and mamma. Mamma, however, exaggerates; she is too intolerant toward the pretty ladies of Milan. Your mother, if I may say so, does not make allowance for the rights of beauty.”

I proceeded to explain, and delivered myself of the following admirable discourse: “Can you imagine, Signorina, what the world would be like if deprived of the sight of beauty. And what is beauty? It is the presence of the gentle sex. Hence one can understand why beauty should be cultivated and even improved and refined. For that matter, the process of refining is applied to all the products of nature. Let me take advantage of an example that you yourself afford.”

Signorina Oretta was sitting under the per-

gola, knitting a coarse stocking on coarse needles from a ball of coarse yarn.

"If I should use this ordinary stocking," I continued persuasively, "to cover a dainty little foot—" I lifted up the hideous stocking as I spoke—"by doing so I would extinguish the flame of beauty."

The Signorina turned and looked at me. Her face reminded me of one of those terracotta images of the Madonna.

"The flame of beauty, Signorina, should not be hidden under a bushel, it should be allowed to shine openly. I do not wish to exaggerate, like some of our novelists, who overemphasize the importance of all the least details of the *dessous* worn by the fair sex. . . ."

She never stirred an eyelash. There are some young women who if they heard a speech like that, would quiver like the sensitive coat of a race horse.

Nothing of the kind. Oretta raised her eyes as leisurely as the rising of the sluggish August moon. I mentioned the names of Lionello and a number of other writers who produced books dealing with love, for which Heaven bless them! This girl is totally ignorant of literature. She said she would like to go to the theater to hear serious plays.

"But no one goes to the theater nowadays," said I, "to hear serious plays."

"Then why do they go to the theater?"

"For many other reasons: to see how the actresses are dressed . . ."

The click-click of the knitting was resumed. Perhaps it is the effect of that coarse gray wool, but it is a fact that those hands do not inspire the slightest desire to kiss them. I continued:

"I am really disappointed that your mother declined my invitation in such an unlooked-for manner. I should have been very proud of a chance to show you my house. It is in rococo style; much too fine for me; but such it is."

I proceeded to describe my modest apartment. "Alas, much too large for me, since I live alone. When one eats one's meals all alone, believe me, Signorina, one is beset with melancholy thoughts."

"But I thought that you lived with your mother?"

"Even so, that is not enough to fill the void in a tender heart."

I didn't get a rise. The click-click of the needles kept steadily on. It was depressing. That girl must have a heart sheathed in India rubber.

What the girl lacks is style. She is not even *à la nature*, like *Sbrindolo*, the latest of Lionello's creations, which has had a prodigious success: *Sbrindolo*, wild flower of the fields, a girl with all the exuberance of a primitive soul. Naturally she dies, because Lionello is the great destroyer of all his creations.

It would be useless for me to describe to Signorina Oretta this sensational creation of *Sbrindolo*. The dog Leone, papa, mamma: these alone cause her emotion. She is like the ante-room of the Counsellor's office: no style, but plaster fruits under a glass bell.

But who ever wants to eat plaster fruit? The glass bell is superfluous, Madam Caramel. Your daughter is a good girl, oh, very, very good. That is all right for you, but for myself I need a little something more. Goodness is like the long chemise of St. Veronica; do you get me, Signorina?

Some days, Papa, the Counselor, comes home with the moon in the wrong quarter; he has it in for the judges, his fellow lawyers, the trial court, the Court of Appeals, the whole wretched business. I am rather amused. All wrong, quite wrong, Counselor! When a lawyer finds fault with the judges, it means that he is not making enough money.

"If my husband were not so conscientious,"

Madam Caramel tells me, "we too would have been riding around in our own automobile, for a long time back!"

"But so long as we three are content," says Signorina Oretta, isn't that enough, mamma?"

Hereupon the Counselor catches her up, hugs her close, and the dog Leone forms a frame-work of joyous gambols around them.

I seem to have discovered in Signorina Oretta an emotion of an entirely different sort, having nothing to do with papa or mamma or the dog, Leone. I made haste to profit by it.

The Signorina was attentively studying an illustrated paper in which there was a fashion plate showing a "*Manteau with fourrures*, Paris model."

"Beautiful thing, isn't it, Signorina? I myself belong to a committee in Milan for deciding upon Italian fashions. It is patriotic, but nothing will come of it. Paris is Paris."

Strange! My explanations did not interest her. The Counselor, who was present, inquired:

"What is that? Furs for women when we are in the middle of summer?"

"All the same, it's the height of fashion," said I. "Probably the ladies wish to suffer from the heat, just as the soldiers do in the

trenches; probably this winter the nude will be popular, so that they can suffer equally from the cold."

Neither the Counselor nor the Signorina even smiled. Since they don't appreciate my wit, thought I, let us be serious:

"My dear sir, it is a fact that the great fur houses of Paris have never placed so many contracts as this year; our dressmakers and modistes have imported in *robes* and *manteaux* close on to fifteen million!"

"And our lire," said the Counselor, "loses thirty-six per cent. on the exchange."

"It is going to lose still more," said I.

"And yet we are Allies;" said he.

"You see, Counselor, that in business such relations are automatic. . . ."

But our discussion was interrupted by an exclamation from Signorina Oretta. "Oh, how infamous! how are they allowed to print such papers?"

What was the matter? We looked: on one page was the *manteau* with *fourrures*, Paris model, and on the opposite page, were a few corpses of soldiers. Her pupils were dilated.

"But when is this horrible war going to end?"

"Signorina," I replied, "it will take some time yet. There are so many people who are getting rich out of it. Take, for example, the matter of

dress snappers: The Piazza at Milan, which supplies Italy, suddenly found itself short of them. They formerly came from Germany. A friend of mine succeeded in importing a huge consignment from Switzerland, and has cleared a big profit. And dress snappers, as you know, are a small item. Imagine how it is with bigger things . . .”

She was staring at me as though the war was all my fault. She turned to papa and said:

“They can all go straight to Hell!”

Papa was left absolutely speechless.

CHAPTER XXI

THE READING OF THE *HERMETIC SONGS*

THE Contessina came with the poet Cioccolani to call upon me. This time he remembered who I was and said, "Good afternoon, dear Sconer."

"Cavaliere Sconer, if you please. I allow only my lady friends to call me 'dear Sconer.'" (I don't remember that we have ever so much as eaten spaghetti or beans together. Good afternoon? In point of fact it was already evening.)

"Delicious, delicious!" exclaims the Contessina, "this *chalet*, buried in verdure. Come and look, Cioccolani. Oh, however did you discover it, Sconer?"

"I beg of you, Contessina," said I, "don't go in. Let us stay outside, here in the garden."

"Are you hiding some mystery? Have you some woodland nymph imprisoned in your castle, Sconer?"

"Contessina, what a thing to hear you say! How would it be possible with your image stamped upon my heart?"

"You strike me as being a good deal of a lady-killer!"

"Oh, Contessina!"

"But for all I know, you may be a model of virtue!"

Hereupon the Contessina summoned her body-guard to decide whether I was a lady-killer or a model of virtue. But all at once she called upon him for an entirely different matter:

"Cioccolani, Cioccolani, come here, come here! Ah, superb!"

Cioccolani and the Contessina ascended to the top of the slope. And I heard her saying:

"There, there, on the other side, that sabre stroke of electric green light! See how the cypress trees down yonder are flaming like candelabra gone mad! See that cloud breaking to pieces: there, there it goes! The towers are falling, and the golden battlements! Horses in frenzied flight, Unicorns, Chimaeras!"

"The Demogorgon!" he replied.

What was happening? Only what occurs every day—the sun was setting.

She was gesticulating and shouting like the valkyrs in productions of German operas at La Scala. He stood motionless, looking like Napoleon witnessing a battle.

I profited by the occasion to slip over to the Counselor's house. "Lisetta," said I, "do me

a favor quickly; I have some guests. Ask the Signora if she has anything that I can serve them, no matter what, coffee, rosolio, or vermouth."

I wanted to laugh; I felt as though I had been racing to call the fire brigade to come and put out the conflagration discovered by the Contessina.

"But where have you been?" she asked upon my return. "You have lost a magnificent spectacle: the sun agonizing in red flames, and suffocating in sobs."

"We shall see it back again to-morrow," said I.

"We have come," said the Contessina, "to read you the *Hermetic Songs*. You remember don't you?"

I had really forgotten but I replied: "Remember? Perfectly! Excellent idea! But why 'hermetic,' if I may ask?"

"Because, apparently, they can't be understood."

"Ah, quite so."

"They can't be understood," corrected Cioccolani, "in the sense of traditional speech. But they convey a natural cosmic sense, even to the most idiotic hearers."

"So you want to find out what effect your verses will make on an idiotic hearer? Go

ahead, my dear fellow, but don't get mixed up. You are certainly something unique."

He was not in the least mixed up: "'Idiotic' means," he said gravely, "in its primitive sense, a *person who has not been initiated*."

"It may mean that for you, but to me it means plain 'stupid.' But you are talking of poetry which is something I don't pretend to understand."

"See here, Sconer," the Contessina hastened to say, "it is like the high mass I was telling you of. You will admit, Sconer, that the public does not understand the words of the ritual, but it succumbs to their influence."

The incident was closed.

Lisetta arrived bringing a fine layout: napkins, yellow rosolio, tea cakes and . . . caramels. The Contessina draped herself upon a rustic chair.

The reading began. How long did it last? I don't know, but certainly a very long time. I remember that Lisetta presently brought two garden lanterns; at first their two slender flames gave no light at all, for twilight still lingered; then they flared up and burned rapidly.

Considerable time must have gone by. At first I suspected they were trying to play a trick upon me, for I did not understand one word.

But no, they were quite serious. Then it was that I began to laugh inwardly.

She was now sitting motionless as a statue; he was standing up with the book in his hand, and was gesticulating and shrilling forth in his high pitched voice: *I am a meteor launched into the infinite. The crickets, little saws cutting facets upon the enormous blackness of crystalline night; the crickets, musical tendons stretched desperately in the effort to hold in bounds the over-flowing night.*

This was poetry, but the thought that occurred to me was: "If I had to write like that to my customers, they would suspend payments on their contracts," and thereupon I felt a great compassion for poor Cioccolani.

"Pay attention," the Contessina admonished, touching me. It made me jump. "The specters are arriving!"

"Gogo, gogogo, Orin, Orin!" read Cioccolani. "*The spectres are arriving with a rush! Here come the skeletons clacking their castanets: gogogo!* And he made a noise that reminded me of the cat the other morning. "*We are insatiate of pleasure, gogogo! Life has not given us pleasure! Gogogo!*" Poor young man!

Perhaps he was going to read the whole book! The Contessina was sitting motionless, and so was I; but I was watching the Contessina.

Those charming curves, of which the Signorina Oretta is as yet deprived, rose and fell slowly as the Contessina breathed. Even if a full figure is not fashionable, it is always attractive. *Gogogo!* I too was beginning to shudder. Every now and again her ankles slipped into view; and I felt myself slipping too.

"*Gogo, gogogo . . . Orin!*" he continued. And she said to me,

"Do you get the rhythm, the anapests, the octaves?"

But in an interval between the *gogogo's*, I heard the sound of suppressed laughter. I slipped away for a moment. Behind the cottage I found Lisetta, choking with laughter.

"Will you be good enough to run on immediately!"

The session was over. It was moonlight. Ciocolani wiped his perspiring brow. I realized that the following silence was becoming embarrassing.

"Very effective . . ." I began.

"Ah?" exclaimed the Contessina, as if roused from a dream. "It delights me, Sconer, to hear you say that. It is an absolutely pure lyric. As yet you have got merely a foretaste; but on a second reading you will feel the full dynamism of the ultra-sensitive Pan."

"Quite so," said I. Then there was just silence and moonlight. For my part, the only "lyric" was the Contessina, and I felt her full dynamism already.

"And the *Attiliad*, Signor Cioccolani," I inquired, "is it like this?"

"It is finer," said the Contessina.

"The other poets," declaimed Cioccolani, "have molded modest images but we have breathed our breath of life into the images themselves. That was not enough! That was humanity. We wish to surpass humanity. And I have the honor, my dear sir," he concluded tragically, "to be called an imbecile in my own town."

"That has sometimes happened to me too," said I, "but I pay no attention. Such things can happen to the best of us."

"Bravo, Sconer," exclaimed the Contessina enthusiastically. "All hail to the glorious genius of the future!"

But the moon was now pale and high up in the sky, and the candles were guttering. So I said:

"Contessina, if you and Signor Cioccolani wish to accept my hospitality, I shall be delighted. But I must warn you that the last tramcar leaves at half past eleven. I am sorry that my chauffeur sleeps so far away; otherwise

I would have him take you back in my automobile.

Accordingly I saw them as far as the tramcar. It was clear moonlight; and moonlight in the country is like the day. The Contessina said:

“Unfortunately we find that we must give up our idea of having the *Attiliad* produced in an open-air theater, and we must sacrifice most of the Huns.” The moonlight was shining full on the Contessina’s face, making it look like mother-of-pearl. She and Cioccolani were talking of the moon. I could not follow what they said, but that was certainly their topic. The Contessina was gazing up at the moon and she said: “To think of her having to sustain all that terrible beauty by herself!”

“Ah, you, Ghiselda, could even sustain the part of Genevieve!” said Cioccolani. What were they really trying to get at? Because, after all, even if one is a poet, a time comes when one wants to attain a recognized position. This thought prompted me to ask:

“Tell me, Signor Cioccolani, do you intend to go on all your life being a poet?”

They both stared at me as though it were I who was crazy, and not they.

“And are your parents satisfied?”

“Don’t so much as speak of them!” said the Contessina. “His father would rather have

seen him behind a threshing machine, counting the bags of grain. Parents are useless when they fail to understand that they have a genius for a son.”

At last the two white headlights of the tram-car came in sight.

CHAPTER XXII

I MAKE PROGRESS

THE other morning, Sunday, the Counselor offered to take me up to the second story to see his library with "his dear books," the books of "his dear father," and the portrait of "his dear grandfather"; and on the way I encountered Oretta in what they call the sitting-room busily dusting and rearranging. Her hair was not yet done up, and caught unawares in a wrapper and with a red handkerchief tied around her head, she had a style of her own: she looked like a Bedouin girl.

I said in passing, "Oh, busy little house-keeper! But wear a pair of old gloves, so as not to spoil your pretty hands."

The Counselor introduced me to his dear books, the books which his father, when alive, had "handled so lovingly," and which he too handles lovingly.

"This is a regular library. And all very well bound," I observed.

He presented me also to his grandfather, that is to say, to the portrait: a face as smooth as a

cameo, that issued from a huge cravat wound around the throat.

"Fine picture! So they used to wear cravats like that. How plainly one sees that he was a calm, well balanced man!"

"And yet he had the soul of an artist." Hereupon, I was treated to biography of his ancestors.

"This room," I observed, "might be called the Gallery of Ancestors."

"Every family," replied the Counselor, "ought to keep a sort of family shrine in the house."

"With apartments at the present high rents, that is impossible! But I am glad to observe that all your ancestors lived to a good old age."

"Yes, we are a rather long-lived family." (There is an interesting detail for my heir.)

"Speaking of books, I myself have one book to my credit."

The Counselor seemed rather astonished.

"Yes, but quite a modest one: a book of hygiene, in which I contend that it is our duty to reach the age of ninety-nine, which is the age established by Moses for the well deserving."

"The best way is never to let yourself worry. . . ."

"That is precisely my contention: always to have a serene outlook upon life."

The Counselor threw open the balcony window. Splendid panorama!

"See, down yonder, I can see my cottage!" said I.

"And one can hear too," said the Counselor. "The other evening you gave a late entertainment. I did not know that you went in for poetry, Cavaliere!"

"Why, it was like this," and I proceeded to explain the occurrence.

"That Cioccolani!" said the Counselor. "Do you know what they call him hereabouts? *Theobroma, Drink of the Gods!* I laughed the other evening, but my wife was furious: 'That mountebank and that crazy woman in my house!' Women, you know, one has to let them talk. Certainly if the Countess Ghiselda's mental equilibrium was equal to her beauty, she would be a perfect creature; but then perhaps she would not have the same fascination she has now. I am not ashamed to tell you that, many a time, when I meet her, I ask myself what is the use of our Civil Code."

I endorsed the Counselor's sentiments. He too, even at his age, has a keen eye for beauty.

"And all the more," said he, "because, poor girl, she is her own worst enemy. The nobility of the race is always at the bottom of her eccentricities."

“Oh, one recognizes the aristocratic type! Look at her nose. And is Cioccolani so rich that he can afford the luxury of being a poet?”

“His father, as I have already told you, is a modest landholder, whose worst misfortune is to have such a son. The old man insists that his own son was exchanged for this one by the nurse; but he has to support him just the same. Plague take it! If he wants poetry, let him go out into his father’s fields! But no, he seeks poetry in Rome, in Milan, in Paris, as the milliners do for the latest style in hats. Poetry lives in nature, and not between the leaves of books!”

“Exactly my opinion.”

“To have sons, nowadays, is a misfortune,” he concluded sighing.

“But you are exempt,” said I, “you have only one daughter, and a model one at that.”

“For different reasons,” said he, “a daughter gives one a great deal to think of. But tell me, Cavaliere, in times like these what sort of a future is there for a girl like Oretta, with such extremely sensitive feelings? Before the war Oretta used to come into this room; I used to teach her things, and we read good books together. I used to feel that my dead ancestors stood there listening. It was one of the greatest pleasures of my life. But now, I don’t

know, I really don't know any longer what to say or what to teach my daughter. The whole world is so changed! Be good? . . . be reverential? . . . be modest? . . . don't tell lies? Oretta often says to me; 'Papa, why don't you call me up any more to study?' I make the excuse that I haven't the time, but if you only knew how my heart aches!"

I assured him that I sympathized with his worthy sentiments. "I, too," said I, "when I was little recalled that my mother used to say to me: 'Ginetto, be good, be modest, never tell lies!' But as one grows older those things adjust themselves, and it all comes out right. But if you will excuse me for asking it, you don't intend your daughter to remain unmarried do you?"

"Why do you ask?" he inquired in amazement.

"Because the young lady will have to find a husband. . . ."

I had touched the secret wound in his heart.

"She is still such a child," he said.

"I know, but she is growing night and day. Some fine day the child wakes up, and it is a duty to make provision ahead of time."

"Does that seem easy to you?"

"No, somewhat difficult! The war is producing a veritable shortage in eligible young men.

Add to that the economic problem: as you very well know, Counselor, as compared with what a wife cost before the war, to-day she costs double, and to-morrow she will cost treble. Marriage to-day is rather a perilous institution."

"Far too much so! And vice is rampant among our young men!"

"Exactly so, Counselor, keep away from vice! It is the greatest foe to perfect health. It is your duty to be on the look-out for a healthy young fellow—healthy, but well-balanced. . . ."

"But where am I to find one, when they are all more or less unbalanced?"

"Yet they can be found. And industrious too, because, believe me, Counselor, idleness, as my mother used to say, is the father of all the vices. And naturally not a poor man, because poverty is a sort of disease."

"But you are proposing that I should seek the Arabian Phoenix," said the Counselor.

"Why so? All things can be found. It is only a question of having a perspicacious eye. To be sure, a young man with these fine qualities, who carried printed on his visiting card *Wanted—A Wife!* represents a treasure. But he can be found! And then, in addition to your collection of ancestors, you can begin a collection of posterity. And when the day

comes when you must close your eyes to this world, you will know in your tomb that the children of your children are treasuring your memory, just as you treasure the books of your revered ancestor here present.

“It seems to me, Cavaliere, that you are of a cheerful disposition!

“I feel it my duty, my dear Counselor.”

But a loud barking from the dog, Leone, interrupted our colloquy.

“It looks to me, Counselor, as though we had a warrior knocking at the gate!”

CHAPTER XXIII

MELAI

WE saw Madam Caramel going down to the gate to meet him; and she cried out, "Well, of all things!" And then she called Oretta: "Oretta, come here!"

The pebbles of the driveway crunched under the iron-shod boots; but the personal appearance of the warrior did not correspond to the sound of his tread. He was a rather lean, rather blond youth, and when he saw us he stood at attention, with a smile on his lips. We commanded: "Break ranks!"

Madam Caramel explained that he was one "of her wounded," and had come to get some socks that she had promised him.

"But," said he, "I didn't want to come: but since to-morrow we must get ready and be off, I said to myself: 'Since they promised you those socks, you had better take them, for they will come in handy up yonder!' But I really didn't want to come. I did want to come the other evening, but I lost my way. I was going to come to-morrow, but to-morrow we leave."

The Counselor asked him into the house, and started to introduce him, but did not know his name.

“Melai, Signore, my name is Melai.” It seemed to occur to him that we might want to know a little more than that. And then it all came out in a spurt, as if from a bottle when the cork is drawn: “Marco Melai, of Florence, so to speak, because my father was then in garrison at Florence. When the war broke out I was in Turin, supposed to be finishing my studies. But we were leading a pretty gay life. So then I said to myself: ‘Melai, what are you going to do?’ I was all alone, you understand. Papa was at the front,—he is a Colonel, yes Signore

“And mamma?” inquired the Counselor.

“Mamma has been dead for a long time, yes Signore. So I had myself enrolled in the cavalry, to start with. ‘If things go well with you,’ thought I, ‘if things go well, your career is made, my boy!’ Just a boy’s ambition, you see! I imagined then that I was going to enter Trieste, waving my sword and shouting, ‘Savoy! Savoy!’ Then followed another six months of carousing in Turin, so that they even wrote a futurist song about me.”

The Counselor wanted to hear the song. So

after much demurring, Melai finished by singing it:

Oh, Melai, if you ever come back here,
We'll paint poor old Turin a gorgeous red!
But sad foreboding says your bright career
Will end with stones above your feet and head!

"And after that?" asked the Counselor.

"After that the cavalry took to their feet and became Alpine chasseurs. Oh, but after passing a whole winter up yonder, I learned some sense. Yes, Signore, up above Cortina. And now we are going back. Where, I don't know. But it is definitely settled that we start to-morrow."

He laughed. The Counselor ordered some beer to be brought. Melai paid his respects and drank as daintily as a lady.

"Really," said Madam Caramel, "you look almost girlish, blond as you are!"

"Others have told me that, too," said Melai.

"And to think that you have already been in the war!" said the Counselor.

Oretta came down with the package of socks, tied up with a tri-colored string. Melai took it up by the string, with many thanks. Madam Caramel explained that they were socks of real wool, knit with needles and with much devotion

—not merely to pass the time, as other women did.

Everybody joined in escorting Melai to the gate. Good wishes and farewells followed.

“But aren’t you going to say anything at all?” demanded the Counselor of Oretta.

Oretta did not say anything at all.

“She is such a timid girl, that daughter of mine!”

We reentered the house in silence, which was broken by the Counselor, who said:

“Who is waging this war? Peasants, commanded by lads like that.”

“Yes, I know,” I permitted myself to say, “but to put those gentlemen over yonder out of business would take a type of man like you and me. These lads let themselves be slaughtered nobly, to be sure, but like so many chaffinches.”

I said this in perfect innocence; but I wish I had never uttered the words!

Oretta’s eyes dilated until all the serenity of those Alpine lakes had disappeared. She said with a sort of sob: “But if you take away faith from one who has nothing else but faith, what is there left? Ah, all that you said then was unworthy, Signore!”

“Oretta!” exclaimed mamma.

“Why, Oretta!” exclaimed papa. “I apologize for her, Cavaliere.”

“There is no need,” said I, “indeed, I am glad of this evidence that the young lady is not timid. I unfortunately failed to make myself understood. What I meant to say was this: In war the first duty is to kill, but not to let oneself be killed.”

“Then why haven’t you gone to war?”

“Why, Oretta!” said mamma again.

“Oretta!” exclaimed papa.

“Signorina,” said I, “we are already working for the State.”

“Forgive her,” said papa, “it is because of her great patriotism.”

(It seemed to me a kind of patriotism that was open to suspicion.)

CHAPTER XXIV

CAPPELLETTI, CHAMPAGNE AND TRUFFLES

L ISETTA came up the hill perspiring under the weight of her marketing. "Fine dinner to-day!" said she. "Cappelletti and a meat pie, with those things that smell so bad but cost so much."

"Truffles."

"Yes, that's it, the Signora has loosened up a bit. The pot is on the stove with a Paduan hen, that was the finest hen in the whole flock; as wise a bird as you or I. But a week ago she stopped laying and the mistress said 'she won't give any more eggs, wring her neck!' and instead she was full of them, poor thing!"

"Is it the Counselor's anniversary?"

"No, it's a farewell feast—not because they're glad, no, but because they are sorry that the young soldier is going away who was here the other evening."

"But didn't he expect to leave then?"

"He is leaving to-night. The mistress was talking with the Counselor and discovered that the father of this Melai is a friend of a friend

of his, or something of that sort. Anyhow, he went to Melai's quarters and invited him to dinner. Such a nice young man and so blond!"

"Well, listen to that, the girl has lost her heart already!"

"Oh, say! Don't think I am as easy as all that! But the truth is that they are talking all the boys away from us, and we poor girls must stay at home and count our beads."

I, too, must go away. A profitable contract makes my presence in Genoa urgent. As luck would have it, about five o'clock in the afternoon I met the Counselor and Melai who were just starting for the former's house on foot. Melai was in full regimentals, for he was leaving that evening.

"You are definitely leaving," I inquired.

"Definitely."

"In that case let us leave together."

The Counselor begged me to postpone my departure, and take dinner with them.

"Impossible! I must be in Genoa to-morrow."

Here I showed the telegram, "Tuesday most convenient. Last word hundred thousand. Big Bertha. Greetings." "*Big Bertha*," I explained "is an expression mutually agreed upon to mean 'a profitable deal,' and to-morrow is Tuesday, my dear Counselor."

"Do you have to go to Milan first, to get the money?" inquired the Counselor.

"A modest sum of a hundred thousand lire is always to be found," I answered. "Besides, I happen to have it in my pocket-book."

"Lucky man!"

Melai's eyes showed utter stupefaction. "In Turin," said he, "I used to have trouble enough to raise a hundred lire." He laughed.

"But, pardon me," said the Counselor, "in that case you have at your disposal the 2 A. M. express, and another express at 5 A. M. And you have your automobile."

"In point of fact, I had thought of going in my auto."

"We shall be just so much the merrier," said the Counselor.

I begged them to wait ten minutes for me at the city gate. I speeded back with my limousine to the Maddelina pastry-shop. I pillaged the shop of the best they had in *fondants* and chocolate bonbons, in a box all belaced and beribboned, fit for a wedding present, also three bottles of extra dry champagne. Then I returned and took the Counselor and Melai on board.

The Counselor gave me the details of the story of the friend of the friend; in short we ended by all three becoming friends.

“You too really must leave to-night, my dear Melai?”

“Impossible to put it off. Duty calls us.”

We all three drove up together in the automobile. The Signora was waiting for us at the gate. She was very gracious and said, “You shall take pot-luck with us.” I presented the box of bonbons and the champagne.

“Oh, why did you put yourself to so much trouble? But look at all the things you have brought!” And her eyes glistened at sight of the multi-colored collection of aristocratic sweets.

Lisetta laid an extra plate.

We dined beneath the pergola. It was most interesting. Signorina Oretta wanted to have Lisetta pass the platter around, as is done in fashionable society. But Lisetta did not know how to pass things around. And Madam Caramel said: “Please let me manage things my own way.” And thereupon she took up the ladle and proceeded to deal out the portions of *minestra*. Big heaping platesful, peasant fashion.

Oretta wanted the wine served in caraffes, but the Counselor supported the national rights of the classic *fiasco*; and Melai sustained this opin-

ion with memories of the days when he helped to paint Turin red.

Let us sum up by saying that the dinner, if not strictly according to etiquette, was at least highly national.

The Paduan hen had borne no grudge, but had trimmed her own gravy with gleaming stars; and the *cappelletti* swam in it in patriarchal corpulence. The Signora modestly sustained the superiority of home-made *cappelletti* over the manufactured kind. But I sustained the superiority of her own particular, personal manufacture, with her own fair hands. My future mother-in-law proceeded to stuff me to suffocation with *cappelletti*. Oretta's slender fingers had also contributed to their making, but not, let us hope, Lisetta's clumsy digits.

Poor Oretta! Her manner of holding her knife and fork left much, very much, to be desired. As for Madam Caramel, she was almost too urgent. She shouldn't have kept insisting, "Another helping? Please, as a favor! . . . My dear man, use your fingers! I do!

"Signora," said I, "it is quite permissible. Yes, the question is still under discussion whether a chicken *à la broche* can or cannot be held with the fingers when eaten. The first thing the queen of England did when she as-

cended the throne was to eat a chicken with her fingers; and the weight of English authority in such matters is highly respectable.”

After the Paduan hen came an apricot *charlotte*, a special effort of Madam Caramel's. Then came my *fondants* and my champagne. We reciprocally congratulated each other; but despite all this the dinner was not a merry one. At a certain point, Melai became mute; he looked around him with strange eyes; then he said: “And yet that's how it is!”

“What's that?” demanded the Counselor.

Thereupon Melai spoke.

CHAPTER XXV

HEROIC DEEDS

MELAI began: "Sitting here in this arm-chair, eating all these good things, drinking this very good champagne . . ." (It was my champagne.)

"You feel as though you were dreaming, isn't that so?" interrupted Madam Caramel. "Poor boys! poor, poor boys!"

The Counselor admonished his wife that it was not quite seemly to call those heroes "poor boys." But Melai made a gesture as though he would brush aside the word *heroes*. Then he said:

"I feel as though I had lost the soul that I had while I was up yonder." He realized that we did not understand, so he explained: "Up yonder with death so near, you acquire a different soul. You have the sensation that there is nothing in the world worth having. Even if you had a hundred million, it would be nothing! You feel that you have renounced everything—even youth and love."

"How terrible!" said the Counselor.

“No, it is peaceful,” said Melai. “We become like monks who have renounced all. And yet we possess everything, because we are conscious of our soul. Perhaps it was because I was on Cadore, a relatively quiet section. Up there, on Cadore, we had sunlight, fragrant woodlands, mountains, snow, divine horizons. Up in those altitudes—I don’t know how—I thought out by myself certain ideas that I had never supposed existed excepting in poets’ dreams. Do you know what I did for tobacco up there? I learned to chew all the bitter herbs of the mountains. In the night-time I waited for the sun. After the sun had risen, I waited for the stars. I never before realized how marvelous day and night are, as I did up there. The sun and the stars whirled round about each other, as if in a tournament. What a marvelous thing the day is! Didn’t any of you ever notice what a marvelous thing it is? A verse from Dante sprang up in my mind and seemed to bathe my soul: *l’ora del tempo e la dolce stagione*. I chewed on that along with the bitter herbs. It seemed to me that every morning at sunrise God silently washed clean the blood-stained earth. Physically I was unclean and offensive, but within me I felt a great purity, I felt the joy of a valiant heart. If we are to die, let’s die bravely.”

At this point I asked: "Are there really many 'cooties' up there?"

"Yes, indeed, lots of them! I kept my head shaved like the friars, and yet, here is a strange thing! I had with me this little tube of perfume, and it gave me a sense of cleanliness, an almost sensuous delight. Here it is!"

I looked at the tube. "Oh! That is furnished by us! One of our products." (What a nice young fellow!)

"Undoubtedly," continued Melai, "it's a mistake for any of us to come home! Do you know that for the first few days I was homesick for those ten thousand feet? In Turin and in Milan there were cafés wide open, moving pictures wide open, electric lights and crowds staring at us with strange eyes. They clapped their hands and watched us curiously. Didn't they know that we were destined to die? Friends recognized us and said: 'Oh, look who's here!' As much as to say: 'Aren't you dead yet?' No, our country does not realize the war! It's different with the other countries, they have realized it! Even our own soldiers don't realize the war; they fight bravely and they die; but for them the war is 'hard luck.' Who knows? Perhaps that is why you call us heroes. But that is something the newspapers haven't said."

"Don't the newspapers interest you?" inquired the Counselor.

"No, they don't."

"Or who's going to win the war?"

"That doesn't interest us either. That interests those who will write its history; and those who afterwards will divide up the earth; but it is of no interest to those who are destined to die."

"But patriotism and glory?" questioned the Counselor.

"Yes, of course," said Melai. "But I don't know why, all those who feel patriotism and glory are the ones that are taken off by death, as though they were predestined."

Madam Caramel had been sitting with her mouth wide open, as though there was a question within her that was struggling to come out. At last it came.

"Are you very much afraid of the dead?"

"Much afraid? No. Sometimes at night they seem to be staring at the moon—but afraid, no. They are dead. They smell rather bad."

"Then you wouldn't be afraid," I inquired, "to kill a man?"

"Why should I be afraid?"

"But aren't we all Christians?" came from the wide open mouth of Madam Caramel.

"That's what we call ourselves; but in war the

other man is after my skin and I'm after his."

Just once Melai had had a tragic experience. We begged him to relate it. He did so:

"Up there in a little cottage were two charming young women who had been left all alone; they spoke the Venetian dialect very prettily, and they provided meals to our officers. One night the Captain discovered that signals were being sent out from that cottage. There was no doubt about it; the young women had a wireless outfit in the house. Besides, the older sister confessed, and assumed all the responsibility, to protect the younger one."

"Was she sent to prison?" asked Oretta.

"No, we shot her."

Oretta stared at Melai incredulously. The rest of us stared too. Melai smiled: "What else was there to do?"

Silence.

"Then she's dead?"

"Of course."

"How did she die?"

"Rather finely: she stepped forward and cried: 'Long live Franz Joseph!' When she had fallen, she looked like a little dead sparrow."

Silence.

Oretta was trembling; the Counselor had let his cigar go out. At that moment, through the silence of the countryside, was heard a soft and

sweet *ting-ting*. It was the *Ave Maria*. Oretta made the sign of the cross. The rest of us came near crossing ourselves too.

We all accompanied Melai to the tramcar for the final leave-taking. My future mother-in-law informed him that in the toe of each sock he would find a surprise in the shape of a caramel. I said to him affectionately:

“Signor Melai, you are rather tall of stature, look out that you don’t hold your head too high. And if you’ll take my advice, restrain yourself from chivalrous actions. Meanwhile, I will send you some powder of our own manufacture, that will settle the cooties.”

Our return was quite eloquent as far as the Counselor and I were concerned; but monosyllabic on the part of Signorina Oretta.

“To think,” said the Counselor, “after all the years since the world was created, after Grotius, after Aberico Gentili, that men should still be slaughtering and massacring one another! Whoever would have thought it?”

“Still,” said I, “we were aware of certain things. I remember the Milan Exposition of 1906. On this side was the pavilion of France: it was devoted to the art *de se déshabiller*. Facing it was the pavilion of Germany. Well,

do you know what they had put right at the main entrance? Two cannon. 'Oh, la, la, la!' I remember exclaiming. And quite recently an agent of a Leipzig house told me: 'Give a good big order, Signor Sconer, because when our Emperor gives the signal, Germany will fling herself forward like a steel serpent.' What could you expect? They were short of money, and the Emperor said: 'My boys, why should you be plundering the house of your good papa? Let us go and plunder the houses of other people.' Then everybody feasted and made merry. Forward march! War was good business."

"Ah!" exclaimed Madam Caramel emphatically; "that is because there is no religion left."

"Bravo!" said I. "Just what we say in Milan, *there is no religion left.*"

Hereupon the Counselor burst forth as though he had suddenly gone crazy, shouting:

"If it were not for this little angel here, I too would go and let myself be slaughtered."

Whereupon the little angel suddenly went crazy herself and cried:

"No, papa! No, papa, not you too!"

"May Divine Providence protect us all!" said Madam Caramel.

"That's all right, but Providence doesn't seem to be on the job," said I. "But do you know,

Counselor, what time it is? Close on to midnight. And to-morrow morning I must be in Genoa. I am off in my automobile."

While the chauffeur was getting the machine in order the Counselor said.

"Look, what a moon!"

The slender trees standing stiffly in the moonlight looked as though made of silver. "And to think, on such a peaceful night, poor France, poor Belgium . . ."

"And also poor Italy, my dear Counselor," said I, "because there is no knowing! But as for you," I said to the chauffeur, "don't be looking at the moon, and don't be thinking of Belgium, because we want to land in Genoa, and not in Vega or in the bottom of some ditch."

CHAPTER XXVI

AN UNSEEMLY SPECTACLE

THE business matter in Genoa turned out to be excellent, but somewhat complicated. It was a question of redeeming at once a quantity of jewelry and precious stones that had been pledged. With my usual far-sightedness I perceived that the investment of capital in diamonds and pearls, in these days of precipitous decline of stocks and bonds, would bring excellent returns; and at the same time it would provide me with wedding presents worthy of Ginetto Sconer.

I was obliged to go to Milan to consult my legal adviser, and there I met with an unpleasant surprise: Biagino, my chauffeur, was called to the colors. A great pity, for he was a fine lad! He saved gasoline and tires in a most praiseworthy fashion. Still another unpleasant surprise: one day, as I returned home, four wounded soldiers, lined up against the wall as my automobile passed, shook their crutches at me, and shouted: "Dirty Slacker!" It was evident from their accent that they were Romans,

but it was also evident that these were critical times. I must give up my automobile.

Honestly, I was very happy when I found that I could change into jewelry the bank notes that I took with me in the first place to P—— in order to purchase the golden haired Contessina.

“All right, instead let us purchase Oretta, with the nut-brown tresses.” The jewels were very beautiful. Among them was a necklace of flawless oriental pearls, which alone represented a value not much less than the whole sum I had had to pay.

“Great Heavens!” I said to myself, “If I should let Madam Caramel see such a sight as this, she is quite capable of indulging in some stupid personalities. No, my lady. All you will see will be just one simple wedding present.” But I want to see whether Oretta’s eyes will rest indifferently upon these jewels worthy of a princess of a reigning house. “Come come, Signorina, the time of double violets has passed, and roses are entitled to adornments such as these.”

Well, what actually has come to pass belongs to the order of unheard of and fantastic happenings—I might almost say, to the order of the cinematograph.

I have set down the memorable date: Friday, June 7, at half past eleven in the morning.

But let us proceed in proper order. I had returned from Genoa to P—— by train, after a miserable journey, suffering from heat and loss of sleep, because when one carries a package of such value, it is no time to sleep.

I thought with satisfaction of Lisetta: "As soon as I reach there I will have her bring up two buckets of water, that ice cold water from the bottom of the well." In imagination I could already feel the pleasant and stimulating shock. "Quick, Lisetta! My pajamas, and here are two gold pieces for you, one for each bucket." I enjoyed this novel idea.

Upon arriving in P—— I took a carriage and with my jewel case in hand, was driven out to my cottage. The horse took his own time, but that didn't matter. As soon as we were beyond the gates, the fresh air of the open country blew upon me, laden with the fragrance of red clover, the warm odor of ripening corn, and the white clusters hanging from the acacias. "Nature," I thought to myself, "is substantially a perfumer, like myself."

But the horse went so slowly that I opened the envelope of a note that I had in my pocket. It proved to be from my chauffeur, and it said:

"If I return I will enter your service again. If I don't return I will say: 'Long live Italy!'" The fine lad! Well, we are all of us patriots these days. Let us hope that everything will turn out for the best, and then we shall have a fine little nest in these idyllic hills, with Signora Oretta and perhaps my heir, to whom we will present the world under its most appealing aspect.

But when we reached the foot of the ascent the horse refused to ascend.

"The poor horses," said the driver, "don't get any oats these days and they have no strength left."

"Never mind," I replied, "I can walk the rest of the way."

So I left the carriage and, with my jewel case in hand, made my way up toward the cottage.

But what was it that my amazed eyes beheld beneath the pergola? Was it he or was it not? Yes, it was Melai. Then hadn't he gone? If that was he, he evidently had not gone. I received a sort of premonitory shock. I could make out Melai, under the pergola, tranquilly seated in a wicker chair. He was serenely smoking a cigarette, and blowing the spirals of smoke heavenward. But he was not alone. Oretta was standing in front of him.

And papa? and mamma? Neither of them!

No one at all, except the dog, Leone, who was sleeping.

So far there was nothing exceptionally grave; but I perceived that something grave was about to take place; because, almost without meaning to, I found myself down in the ditch, peering through the hedge at what was taking place under the pergola.

The scene had changed, but it was just as easy to understand. Melai's eyes had grown tender as they rested upon Oretta; and I felt my own eyes growing savage. All at once, Oretta's little hand reached over and took a chocolate from a box that stood on the rustic table; she carefully unwrapped it and again reached out her hand. Melai's mouth seemed to be waiting; he had thrown his cigarette away, and the chocolate went in to take its place.

"What do these confidential proceedings mean? This seems to be a hereditary failing! But that box is my box, those chocolates are my chocolates!"

Melai was now holding his eyes shut as though taking his first communion.

"Is that what you call renunciation, you impostor?" I exclaimed silently. "But here comes something that is even worse!" All at once, what did I see? I saw Signorina Oretta draw even closer to him, reach out her hand and

thrust her fingers through his hair. Her hand passed back and forth, as though she were combing it; and he bent his head forward and let himself be combed. It was a silent but impressive spectacle. I felt a singing in my ears. It seemed all at once as though, in all the surroundings fields there were little hidden Cupids, accompanying the scene on violins. Perhaps it was only the locust.

Then, I don't know whether it was the sunlight moving under the pergola, or my eyes that played me a trick, but the two figures strangely shifted their positions. Oretta bent down lower and lower, or allowed herself to be drawn down; their eyes came closer and closer, their two faces merged together and ceased to move. Evidently this was a kiss! The music of the Cupids ceased and the sun seemed to stand still.

I do not know for how long a time Melai and Oretta remained like this, because I myself was by this time paralyzed in the bottom of my ditch. I shook myself a little from time to time and said: "Why, they are kissing forever! Bravo, Signorina Oretta, and congratulations to you, too, Signor Melai, congratulations! A fine saint, I don't think!"

I meant to confront them and say just these very words, but I couldn't, because all of a sudden the dog Leone awoke; barked furiously,

barked savagely; and I saw him, with yawning jaws and every hair bristling, bounding in my direction.

I reached my cottage in safety, but prodigiously dirty. Fortunately I still had my jewel case with me.

CHAPTER XXVII

I AM ANGRY FOR THE FIRST TIME

NOT until I was back in my cottage, and my mirror showed me my soiled and haggard face, did I have a full realization of my disappointment. I shouted aloud: “Jade, hypocrite, *Mam’zelle Nitouche!* Fire ahead, papa isn’t watching! ‘Such a timid girl,’ says papa!”

The edifice that I had so carefully constructed, the time I had expended and—I may as well add—the money too, had all come to nothing. And if I want to be exact I must add that my shattered aircastle was still in the course of shattering. A girl not yet of age, a little flapper, before whom I had steadily restrained myself out of extreme delicacy, from uttering the sacramental words—“Signorina, I love you”—to think of a girl like that giving such kisses as those I saw, the kisses of an experienced woman. Ah, false little flapper! Or perhaps flappers have ceased to exist. Probably while I was brushing the mud from my clothes, they were still going on with their kissing; and at that thought I was forced to admit that I was suffer-

ing. Indeed, my eyes were starting from my head. And perhaps what made me even more furious than the kiss, was the sight of the preparatory steps that led up to it: when she combed his hair so gently with her fingers; and when she slipped into his mouth one of my chocolates. Like this! She did it like this! And I found myself pantomiming the act of slipping a chocolate into my mouth. "You are suffering, Ginetto Sconer, you are really suffering!" The sweet freshness of that young girl which I had expected to enjoy, Melai had enjoyed instead. Woe to them if I had been a man of blood, such as are so numerous to-day! At this hour two corpses would be lying beneath that pergola.

The next morning I was feeling a little better, yet not enough so to prevent my saying, when Lisetta came to put the rooms in order:

"Fine goings on, I must say, in the other house! My congratulations, my many congratulations on your little mistress."

"Why Signore?" inquired Lisetta.

"Perhaps you don't know what happened yesterday, at about this time, over there under the pergola?" And I related what I had seen: "An indecent spectacle! I couldn't tell how long a time she kept on combing his hair."

"You must understand, Signore, that she

knew death couldn't get him by the hair so long as she was combing it. She did the same thing every morning, all the time that you were away."

"You mean to say . . .?"

She assured me that she did.

"But the evening that I went away, he went too! So his going was just a fake?"

"I don't know, Signore," said Lisetta, "but I think that he got an extension of leave for family matters."

"Ah, you call this a family matter? A fine state of things!"

"The morning after you left, Signore, we suddenly saw him coming back again, and the mistress made the greatest fuss over him."

"Then her mother knew all about it?"

"I think she did."

"And her father too?"

"Oh, he is always the last one to know about things."

"But when did they fall in love?"

"Who can tell, Signore? Love comes like that!"

"What do you mean, 'like that?' Like what happened under the pergola?"

"Anything might happen, even under the pergola."

"But you, Lisetta, who knew my intentions,

you who saw that I was absent, why didn't you come to the rescue?"

"Ah, Signore," exclaimed Lisetta, quite mortified, "I did what I could; and the moment I had a chance I spoke to the Signorina."

"Well?"

"I didn't want to tell you, Signore, for fear of offending you."

"I authorized you to speak."

"Well then, if you will know, the Signorina said: 'Hush, hush, Lisetta! Do you think I would marry a big, fat, red man, old enough to be my father?'"

"Did she say that? Incredible!"

"Her precise words."

"But you ought to have insisted; 'A man who knows what he is saying, who knows what he wants, who counts for something in the world, . . .'"

"I said all that, Signore."

"And she?"

"And she?" She said: 'With all the nonsense that you talk, you will end by getting housemaid's knee' "

"The silly girl! You ought to have told her that I had come to an understanding with her father."

"I said that, too."

"And what did she answer?"

"That sooner than marry a wig maker, even if he were covered with gold, she would throw herself off from the campanile of San Fulgenzio, which is the highest in the town."

"But the girl is mad!"

"No, Signore: she is in love!"

Hereupon Lisetta became silent, and I too.

But those atrocious words repeated by Lisetta still rang in my ears. I a wig maker? I am an up-builder of beauty, and also of civilization, because those who use my products are cultured and refined. I felt myself invaded by an auto-intoxication of fury.

"I shall pull the ears of that young man," said I.

"Don't do that, for mercy's sake!" said Lisetta. "All the young men who have been at the front have become so blood-thirsty."

"Do you mean to suggest that I am afraid?"

"Oh, no, Signore. I only say that this is a time when a catastrophe might happen."

"Of course I don't want to cause a tragedy, but at all events, I shall talk to him, and tell him what I think of him: 'See here, my fine fellow, so fond of star-gazing, it seems that you prefer to gaze at something besides stars underneath the pergola. Congratulations!' Oh, I shall tell him all that, and more too."

"It is impossible, because he has gone."

"I don't believe it, because he ought to have gone so many other times. He has only gone away provisionally."

"No, gone for good."

"In that case I shall write to him: 'Ah, false sentimentalist! Instead of stars, you prefer the things of this base earth, including my chocolates.' And that wretched girl prefers a beardless stripling, who is here to-day and gone to-morrow, to me, who counts for something in this world. I 'talk nonsense,' do I! 'A stout, red man,' am I!"

"You are a man who might make any woman happy."

"You have uttered a great truth. But you do not know all. Do you know why I went to Genoa? This, you see, is the terrible part of it! I went to Genoa expressly to buy the wedding present. And it was precisely while I was buying the rarest of jewels that I was betrayed."

"Oh, poor Signore! Is that really so?"

"Do you wish to question my word? Come here, come here, Lisetta. Look, look, if only to have an idea of who I am. This was my wedding present."

I led her into my room and opened the jewel box.

"Holy Virgin! How wonderful!"

Look at this necklace alone. To give you

some idea, not even the Queen has one like it."

She reached out one finger to touch it.

"You ought to feel the weight."

"And are they real pearls?"

"Are they real? Yes, real oriental. Not a flaw in them."

"They must be worth a lot!"

"As much as you, and she, and he, and the whole shanty with the Counselor and his wife included. Yes, yes, help yourself. All I want is to get away from here. Take the nail scissors, take the face powder, and the perfume atomizer, if you care for it." I let her pillage my whole toilet set.

I went down into the garden because I felt that my eyes were savage, and my whole face discomposed. There was nobody in sight. But when I saw Oretta's kittens sticking their pink tongues into a bowl of white milk, I gave them a savage kick; and the two kittens went flying over the hedge.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I BECOME A PHILOSOPHER AND A POET

I WAS excited that day; but I have calmed down since. Still I have retained an inward sense of bitterness and disillusion.

"There she is, the shameless girl!" I saw her from the window of my cottage sitting under the pergola and working, with that abominable dog, Leone, beside her. Whoever would have imagined that that girl was capable of giving such kisses; of lavishing such caresses? A girl still in her teens! "No, Signorina! You were just a fake, Miss Innocence, a counterfeit lily. You have betrayed my trust." I was mentally addressing these words to Signorina Oretta from my window, when I perceived that there were some lilies in my garden. How had they come there? Probably they had been there already, and had bloomed without my being aware of it.

Perhaps this was what had happened to Oretta; she had bloomed under the influence of love. The women in Lionello's books bloom both summer and winter; but the phenomenon

in nature is a far lovelier sight. Only I should have been the one to do the awakening, Signor Melai, I and not you! You have appropriated my property! And all through jealousy. What a frightful emotion! It acts like a suction pump upon the heart, and drains off all one's blood and all one's property rights. One no longer has what belongs to him. There it is, but it is no longer his; it belongs to another man. Property rights in a woman are not like those that I have in my apartment house. To be sure, there are plenty of other women—but what good is that? What I wanted was that one woman! With that specially shaped mouth, that particular smile, that particular fragrance that is her's alone. Why, Oretta, didn't you give your caresses to me? Why didn't you comb my hair in that special way of yours?

While I was thinking in this strain I realized that such an operation would not have proved wholly successful, because my hair is considerably plastered down with pomade. When I drew back my hand, it was pleasantly perfumed, but rather sticky. I must admit that Melai's hair lends itself better to that sort of operation. But that does not alter the fact, Signor Melai, that you appropriated my property, and that she allowed herself to be appropriated. And

then there came back to my mind those abominable words of hers: "A big, fat, red man!"

Ah, Signorina Oretta! I am a big, fat, red man, am I?

"Your opinion, Signorina," I apostrophized her from my window, "is all wrong! I am what I am! I am no spider, garbed in greenish gray; but I am a man on a solid footing who counts for something in the world; and your Melai is only some one who is here to-day, and is gone to-morrow. And you yourself, Signorina? I thought you capable, not only of modesty, but also of understanding the advantages of the exceptional position which I was offering you. That is a superior type of poetry which you are unable to appreciate. So much the worse for you."

I was in the midst of combing my disordered hair when Lisetta came in.

"Does it strike you, Lisetta, that I am big and fat and red? Perhaps my hair is red! No, not red, Titianesque. Wait, wait until a little time has passed, and then you will see how bitterly the old woman, and the young woman too, will repent."

"Perhaps you are right, Signore," said Lisetta. "But if you only knew how my young mistress has suffered since he went! She

doesn't sleep, she doesn't eat, she's grown very pale."

"This news," said I, "greatly pleases me. Let her take opium! Ah, it doesn't happen every day that a poor provincial girl can find a husband with a hundred thousand lire of wedding presents in jewels alone, besides all the rest."

"Since he left the poor child has lost at least six pounds weight."

"Two pounds a day," said I.

"And besides that she has indigestion!"

"Let her take Cascara Sagrada," said I.

"She prays every day that the good Lord will keep him safe."

"Tell her to make another vow, never to leave the house on Saturdays; then she will have two days at home, Fridays and Saturdays."

"I think you are very unkind, Signore!"

"Would you expect me to be kind to any one who has treated me so badly?"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE USELESSNESS OF MY BEST ELOQUENCE

I SHOULD not have had the following interview with Signorina Oretta if her persistent presence under the pergola had not steadily augmented my indignation. And besides, my outraged vanity demanded some reparation.

She sat there, from morning till night, all by herself, bent over her work, with the dog, Leone, motionless at her feet.

Having thought out what I would say, I made my toilet as if for a visit of condolence. I drew on a pair of gloves and took my way up the little path. My step crunching upon the gravel caused Oretta to turn her head. The dog Leone—forever accursed—was surly as ever; he did not turn his head, and he did not bark, but contented himself with showing his teeth.

“Good morning, Signorina Oretta,” said I. “I am distressed that I was unable to exchange greetings once more with Signor Melai, the dear, delightful young man!”

“He has gone.”

“Yes, I know, gone for good.”

(Silence.)

“With your permission, Signorina, I will sit down.”

“Why, of course.”

(“With your permission, too,” said my questioning glance at the dog, Leone.) I seated myself on the rustic chair, where Melai had sat.

“If you will also permit it, Signorina, I should like to speak with you.”

“Why, of course.” She continued to sit with her head bent down, over her embroidery. Hereupon I proceeded to address her with a discourse at once pathetic and persuasive,

“Signorina Oretta,” I began, “I am going to speak to you—how shall I put it?—not poetically but practically. Prior to Friday, June 7, at half past eleven in the morning, I lived in the assurance that you had never crossed, so to speak the frontier of Love. I even believed that you were unaware of Love’s existence; consequently conducting myself like the perfect gentleman that I prided myself in being, I always maintained a decorous reserve toward you. Are you doing me the honor of listening to me, Signorina?”

The Signorina Oretta said nothing, so I proceeded:

“But on the morning of Friday, June 7, at half past eleven, having just returned from my

trip to Genoa, which had, if I may say so, some connection with what I am about to tell you, I was forced to recognize, in a manner which—I beg you to believe—was at once indisputable and wholly involuntary on my part, that despite your demureness you already had a knowledge—not to say property rights in—the realm of Love. I will be specific: Here is what occurred. . . .”

While I specified, I expected to be interrupted, but I was not. I expected that her face would crimson. But nothing of the kind happened.

Presently I finished specifying. She continued to sit in rigid silence.

“I am sorry,” said I, “that Signor Melai has left, because I wanted, oh, not to make a tragic scene, but simply to say: ‘Congratulations, Signor Melai, sincere congratulations! We recognize that, after proclaiming the vanity of all worldly things, you have altered your opinion; and that after contemplating the moon and stars, you have discovered that it is also pleasant to lower your eyes upon a lovely face. Congratulations!’ ”

Signorina Oretta began to understand the significance of my remarks, for she started; but I continued:

“And let me congratulate you also for your success in recalling that young man to a fuller

appreciation of earthly blessings. It has been very pleasant for him, however unpleasant it may have been for me. But I owe you no grudge, Signorina! Just at first, I confess, I received a somewhat unfavorable impression in your regard; but then I thought it over and realized that the thing was bound to happen sooner or later, either through the intervention of Signor Melai, or of someone else. I should have been glad myself to be the lucky man—but that has nothing to do with our present discussion. What I am anxious to make clear is that I had singled you out for favorable intentions. I had even permitted myself to make certain propositions to your father, and had received encouraging assurances from him. I will tell you something more: my trip to Genoa was for the purpose of acquiring a few decorative baubles of a kind not to be disdained by ladies of the most rigid virtue. However, on the morning of June 7, I witnessed what I may describe as an assault upon your own virtue. That spectacle, believe me, was not included in the program of my journey! But note this: I am not discussing at the present moment the preference given to Signor Melai: you find Melai attractive, and consequently you find me repellent. My masculine pride is wounded. I realize that means nothing to you. Only, I am surprised

that a young lady like you, whom I selected especially for your qualities of mental balance, should have been so susceptible to such a phenomenal outburst of what I may call irrational passion. No! I am speaking plainly," said I to the dog, Leone, who was eyeing me very sharply, "I am speaking plainly as my habit is; plainly, but with energy and precision." And I awaited a reply.

Hereupon Signorina Oretta's lips moved, and this reply came forth:

"We had known each other before."

"That is a detail of which I was wholly unaware," said I. "You wish to imply that a prior right existed in favor of Signor Melai?"

She nodded her head affirmatively.

"My heart still bleeds; but honor is saved!"

Signorina Oretta thereupon moved impulsively; her hand groped and drew out a letter; she passed it to me.

"Signorina," said I, "you wish to offer me documentary proof of your verbal statement; but it is not necessary, I assure you."

But she insisted.

"Well, since you insist. . . ." Thereupon I drew the letter from its envelope, unfolded the sheet, and read as follows:

"Signorina, my name is Marco Melai; I am a Corporal in the 6th Cividale Battalion. I am

twenty-two years old, and have been in the war since October 5, 1915. I have already been wounded once. My father is a Colonel; my poor mother is no longer in this world. I hope that this introduction will be sufficient. Where am I now? Up on the mountains. I leave it to you to guess where. Do you want to be the god-mother of my Alpine troops? I assure you that they are fine young fellows, as good as they are brave. Perhaps it is not my place to say so, but the truth never does any harm."

I returned the letter to its envelope, and restored it to her with my best manner. She replaced it within the none too voluminous archives of her bosom.

"But permit me to ask, Signorina," I resumed, "it would appear from the tone of this letter that the gentleman in question was not personally acquainted with you."

Oretta replied: "No more was I acquainted with him."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask for a little further enlightenment?"

"A year ago," said Oretta, "while I was still in school, the principal asked us girls to donate some books and reading matter for the soldiers. So I gave a copy of Silvio Pellico's "My Prison Days," in which my name was written on the fly-leaf."

"And probably your address too?"

Yes, it was. And then one morning the postman came and gave me this letter. . . ."

"Signorina, I beg of you, calm yourself. And as soon as you received this letter, you answered it?"

"No, I showed it . . ."

"To papa?"

"No, to mamma."

"And mamma said . . . ?"

"To answer it with a few kind words."

"And naturally you answered?"

"Yes, Signore."

"And he continued to write?"

"Yes, Signore. Later I met him here at the hospital, where I used to go with mamma. Once when I went to the hospital, I wore a rose. . . ."

"And he asked you for it?"

"Yes."

"And you gave it to him?"

"Yes."

"And mamma was present?"

"Yes."

(I understood: the rose had taken root.)

"Will you permit one more question? Isn't it a fact that you care more for papa than for mamma?"

She stared at me in bewilderment.

"Your papa is a serious man. A man sure

of himself. He knows that roses bloom in May, but later on comes winter. Your eyes see only the springtime, but ours are more farsighted, and overlook the whole horizon of life. Do you think, Signorina, that your father will be pleased, the day that he learns that you have bound up your destiny with that of a soldier?"

"He is in line of promotion, Signore!"

"Even granting that he is in line of promotion. . . ."

I wanted to say "in line of being a corpse" but I restrained myself; the two Alpine lakes had been gradually clouding over, and my first impulse was to take my handkerchief out of my pocket and pass it over her pretty face. And yet it gave me some satisfaction to see her suffer.

"But it is those fine exalted souls like him," she suddenly burst forth, "who are sacrificing themselves to-day!"

Signorina Oretta uttered these words with notable agitation, and I was particularly struck by the heaving of her breast, which hitherto had been chiefly conspicuous by its absence.

"Signorina," I replied, "I share your noble sentiments. However, if you wish to reconsider the matter, if you would like to have a longer time in which to give me an answer, I, on my part, am disposed to regard the phenomenon

which took place under this pergola, on the morning of June 7, as though it had never happened."

Her reply was unexpected, and not at all such as my generosity deserved.

"Signore," she said, "I have done what was right according to the dictates of my heart. If he ever comes back, we shall be married. If not, let God's will be done."

She uttered these words of her own free will, and meanwhile two tears, emissaries of the two Alpine lakes, descended of their own free will, down her cheeks.

"In that case, Signorina, there is nothing more to say. What you have done is sentimental, but it is not practical!" And I extended my gloved hand. Then I arose and made a deep bow.

Signorina Oretta could not have declared in a more explicit way that she had surrendered all her reserves to the national loan for the war. In any case it is a fact that women have a tendency to sacrifice themselves to men of the sanguinary type. It seemed to me that I should not lower my dignity by further insistence. Continue to weep, Signorina Oretta, continue to weep! When the gentleman comes back, if he ever does come, he will find nothing left but a nose, some hair, and four crossed bones, of what was once the Signorina Oretta.

CHAPTER XXX

REVENGE IS THE FOOD OF THE GODS

SEATED in front of my chalet, I was in the midst of drawing up a sort of final balance, when a shadow intercepted the light and stopped in front of me.

It was Madam Caramel. At sight of her I felt arise within me such concentrated wrath that for the first time I believed myself capable of a violent action.

"Good morning, Cavaliere," she said, with delightful tranquility. "Within the week the white-washer is coming without fail to white-wash your kitchen."

"The white-washer? It is no longer necessary."

"But isn't your esteemed mother coming?"

"No, she has gone to Aix-les-Bains."

"Oh, how sorry I am!"

"So am I."

(Silence.)

"You seem to be in bad humor, Cavaliere," said Madam Caramel.

"I? Perhaps I am. But you, on the con-

trary, in view of what happened, seem to me to be in far too good humor."

"Any bad news in to-day's bulletin of the war?"

"In the bulletin of the war? I don't know: but there certainly is in your home bulletin."

"In my home bulletin?"

"Yes, indeed. What? Don't you know? Why you've joined the colors! I am still astounded: that a woman like you, who are no longer a young girl, who up to yesterday gave evidence of mental balance, of a sense of reality, should unexpectedly decide to take a leap in the dark! If you were only leaping alone it wouldn't matter, but you are dragging your daughter and that good husband of yours along with you."

I was delighted to see that Madam Caramel was dumbfounded by my words. She asked me what had happened.

"You ask me that? Your clothes are burning and you ask me what is happening? You ought to know better than I. Didn't you give permission to Signor Melai to visit here?"

"But that is only natural! They are engaged."

"As to nature's part in it, no one could doubt. Indeed, I may tell you that three days ago, at half past eleven in the morning, on my return from Genoa, I witnessed a scene under that per-

gola that was only too natural." I described the scene, but Madam Caramel was not astonished nor did she change color. She contented herself with observing that a kiss between engaged couples was an old established usage. "But, excuse me, what business is it of yours?"

"You ask me what business it is of mine? That is the very point we are coming to. Meanwhile, I want you to observe that this was quite a special kiss, requiring many feet of film, and for reasons of personal decorum I withdrew without a glimpse of the final exposures. And yet you are scandalized by the small amount of leg displayed by the girls in Milan! But we will let it go at that! Do I understand that this engagement was with your consent?"

"Do you happen to know," demanded Madam Caramel, "anything against Melai? A young man of honorable family. . . ."

"I don't question that."

"A young man who has always shown the most scrupulous delicacy, so much so that the first thing he did was to call upon me with a letter from his father. And on the other hand, when a young man has done his duty to his country; when a young man has been wounded, and is in a hospital, alone and miserable, and asks to correspond with Oretta, I leave it to you, was it possible for me to say no? If we honest Chris-

tians won't help each other, who is going to help us?"

"That is a highly respectable attitude, but I do not share it. Your definite duty, on the contrary, was to cut short this infatuation the moment you were aware of it, cut it absolutely short. Probably you, too, Signora, have succumbed to the charm of a uniform."

"Oh!"

"Pray don't get excited. Consider rather—I mention incidentally—the havoc it has played with your daughter. She was a lovely flower, and now she is rags and tatters."

"But we all must expect to suffer in this world."

"Who ever persuaded you to believe that?"

Madam Caramel faced my calmness with the first symptoms of mental perturbations. "Oh, I feel sure," said she, "that when my husband knows all, he will say: 'You have done well!'"

"I doubt it. But even if that was so, I should say that your husband is more of a poet than Cioccolani! Excuse me, Signora, but you are standing, and that distresses me." I brought forward a chair and begged Madam Caramel to be seated.

"I may be mistaken," I continued, "indeed I hope that I am mistaken; but you have committed an imprudence, dear Signora, the conse-

quences of which may be incalculable. You have interrupted the prosperity of your family. No doubt about it! Do you know how families are ruined? Generally in consequence of some one initial error which passes almost always unobserved. It may be signing an accommodation note, or a breach of contract or a lack of hygienic precaution, a reckless marriage, which is a clear case of a lack of moral hygiene; and that is your case! After this, dear Signora, you can't help matters by having your washing done at home, or keeping chickens, or making your own sausages and bacon."

I observed with pleasure that Madam Caramel was beginning to be visibly perturbed.

"But when the war is ended, and he returns, they will be happy. Don't you think the war will end soon? she inquired anxiously.

"End soon? Why it is hardly a year since it began. Where have you been reading such nonsense? In the newspapers, probably! Do you suppose it's as easy to skin the Germans as it is to skin your pig? Ah, no! We business men know a thing or two. End the war? Before that happens America will have to be roused with her hundred millions; and then Asia with at least another five hundred millions. Remember that to-day, with the wireless telegraph, the whole world can be brought into the war."

“But it will end sooner or later.”

“That may be. But afterwards there will be revolutions. And if any one is to be saved it will be modest capitalists like us, who, if necessary, will know how to buy up even revolutions.”

“But God will not permit . . .” stammered poor Madam Caramel.

“How do you suppose that God with such a vast field to cover, can bother himself about little details? You still have time, dear Signora, to begin a restorative course of treatment for your daughter.”

“But he will come back and make a position for himself, and when once married they will be happy.”

“Let us hope so, but I have my doubts. Even assuming the happiest outcome you must not forget that that young man used to go on sprees! Now I never went on sprees! Besides, as you yourself heard him say, he shoots young women! Understand that I admire and am fond of Signor Melai, but I doubt if he is the right man to make your daughter happy. But if she loves him, let her have him! Yet as time goes on marriage becomes a luxury that only a millionaire can permit himself. And all the while, my dear Signora, you actually had happiness within easy reach here in your home. I speak of these things with the utmost calm, as is customary

with me. But I wish to emphasize them! Excuse me a moment, Signora?"

I went into the house and returned with the jewel case. Resuming my seat, I continued:

"It was so, Signora: My eyes had rested with special favor upon your daughter, and I was not averse to asking her hand in marriage. It would have been a sensible union, without excessive passion on the part of the young lady, I must admit. But I do not believe—though I may be wrong—I do not believe that a marriage should begin with an incendiary period, like an incandescent mantle that must be first burnt off. No, I don't believe it. At all events I cherished a hope, an illusion in my heart; but I won't speak of myself. You must realize that there are plenty of others who are only waiting to be asked! I am speaking of poor Signorina Oretta, who has waltzed through her brief hour of spring-time joy, and now must pay for it bitterly! And it also wrings my heart to think of your husband, worthy man, who deserved to finish his days in tranquility. But I am impatient, Signora, to give you the documentary proof of what I say; I do not bluff, I show documents!"

I opened the jewel case.

"Here they are. I went to Genoa on purpose. Here they are: these, as you can see, were my wedding gifts. Quite an assortment and all gen-

uine; rubies, emeralds, turquoises, the work of famous lapidaries; and not a flaw among them!"

Madam Caramel had not a thing to say.

"Instead of seeing your daughter pine away," I continued, "you would have seen her beautiful and happy, the wife of Cavalier Ginetto Sconer; and a year hence you yourself, if I may mention it, would have been a grandmother, and your daughter, in all likelihood—though Heaven forbid!—would have been growing much too fat. Destiny, dear Signora! But now it would be quite useless to have the kitchen white-washed."

Thus I brought our session to a close.

CHAPTER XXXI

CHAMPAGNE, PEACHES AND HAM

“**W**HAT are you doing, Signor Sconer? Still leading a bucolic life?”

“Alas, Contessina, that is what I have been doing; but now I am packing my luggage. I came to P—— on certain business, which has fallen through. It will have to be entered on the debit side.”

This time the Contessina had come to see me alone, without having the poet following on a leash.

“It is fearfully hot, isn’t it?”

“Do I disturb you, Sconer?”

“You perturb me, but you don’t disturb me. To be sure, I can not receive you with all the prescribed honors. Everything is upside-down here.”

“May I have a glass of water, Sconer?”

“Contessina, you are thirsty, you are heated, You have come on foot along that road in the burning heat of this terrible sun.” (It was about midday.) “When I think that the skin of your adorable face, and of your adorable hands might

be sunburnt, it makes me quiver with remorse."

"I had my gloves and this veil."

"Ah, that helps matters."

"And besides I delight in the glad sunshine."

"Well, I don't; in the summer I keep in the shade."

"And I, on the contrary, want all the full sunshine; and in winter, I like to walk through the snow, when everything is covered with snow, and feel the joy of sinking into it up to my ankles; to draw in the snow with each breath."

"That is the time when I prefer a steam radiator."

But little beads of perspiration were forming on her brow. She drew out a little lace handkerchief that was quite inadequate, since it was no larger than the palm of my hand. Hereupon I produced two of my finest handkerchiefs. "Permit me!" And I laid one delicately over her forehead, and the other across her neck.

"Sconer, you are veiling me like Isis."

"To tell the truth, I would prefer to reverse the process."

"You are very audacious . . ."

"Contessina, I shall treasure these handkerchiefs which are imbued with your personal fragrance. But what were we saying? Oh, water! The water here is at the bottom of the well, and the well is deep. But now that I stop to think,

there must still be in the pantry, a remaining bottle or two of an unlucky stock. If you could bring yourself to accept champagne as a substitute for water . . .”

I had in mind the remaining bottles of that *extra dry* champagne which I had procured on the day of the dinner in Melai's honor: probably some of that champagne had served to feed the flames that I was destined to witness on the morning of June 7. Alas, my poor *extra dry* champagne!

“It will probably be warm, but it will be quickly cooled if we lower it down the well.” The Contessina agreed delightedly.

I found that there actually were two silver-necked bottles remaining forgotten in the pantry.

The Contessina was enjoying herself. She insisted upon putting the bottles in the bucket, and letting down the rope by herself.

“Wait a moment, Contessina.”

“What's the matter?”

“Why if we lower the bottles like that, when the bucket sinks into the water, the bottles will float out and away; and who will fish them up again? Better tie them into the bucket.”

She was amazed: “Always so far-sighted, Sconer?”

“Always, Contessina. System of our House.” We proceeded to tie and lower the bottles.

Now for the glasses. In the pantry there were many glasses, but none for champagne. There was an old-fashioned corkscrew, but it was of no use. This was the first time I had had occasion to use any of the "*articles consigned to-day, May 6, to Cavalier Ginetto Sconer*" by Signorina Oretta. What hopes I had, then! But those days have fled. Hope blossomed in the month of violets, and hope died in the month of roses. Let us think no more of it.

There were no napkins; but there were plenty of towels. Ghiselda discovered one of coarse linen with fringed ends.

"That looks like a table-cloth."

"No, a towel. We have some like that at our villa, The Cypresses." Did I say *our* villa? I fear that we have lost the villa of The Cypresses." She made a gesture with her hand and blew upward, as if blowing a soap-bubble. "It's a pity! I was born there."

We now drew up the bottles. The sight of the cold water in the bucket attracted her; she plunged her hand in, scooped up the water in the hollow of her palm, and amused herself by letting it trickle back.

"Do you know what Pindar called water?"

"I am sorry to say . . ."

"And you know what St. Francis called it? 'Humble and chaste'!"

"Oh, the poor man! But we are going to drink champagne."

I cut the wires, and the cork popped: Ping! The champagne spattered over us, but the Contessina drank.

"Drinking is delicious," she exclaimed, "when one is thirsty."

I thought so too.

"Are there any biscuits, Sconer?"

"There were plenty, and chocolates too. But there are none left! Are you hungry, Contessina?"

"Good Heavens, yes."

I looked in amazement at that marvelous creature, subject like the rest of us to the laws of hunger; but such things are likely to happen around midday. A luminous idea flashed upon me.

"Contessina, what if we have luncheon together?"

"Here?"

"Yes, Contessina."

"Here, out of doors? Beside the well? Under these trees? Ah, delicious!"

"All the more so, Contessina, because the well acts as a refrigerating plant. The only trouble is, there is nothing to eat. Wait a moment, though."

I left her and hunted up Lisetta, to whom I explained the emergency, and begged her to bring something, anything, only quickly.

On returning I said to the Contessina, "We shall need some plates and knives and forks." (There was the pantry with the articles consigned to the one-time Cavalier Ginetto Sconer.)

"Let me do that," said she. She insisted on laying the table, and I was obliged to let her have her way.

"Contessina," I suggested, "if we are going to . . ." (I hesitated, for how could I bring myself to utter such a vulgar word as *eat*?) "If we are going to partake of a little luncheon, I think that it would be better to carry the table out of doors first, and set it afterwards."

We transported a little table to a spot beside the well, and near the hedge, under the shade trees. After which, she commanded me to sit down and wait. I quivered with pleasure at being ordered about by her. While she came and went, setting the table, I sat admiring her.

"Contessina," said I, "permit me to pay you a compliment. You remind me of those marvelous chamber-maids that are to be found only in the novels of my friend, Lionello."

She laughed. As she came and went the generous outlines of her figure danced rhythmically.

Ah, summer time, considering the scanty raiment young women wear now-a-days, you are a terrible season!

“Contessina, permit me to pay you another compliment?”

She was wearing two modest low-heeled gray slippers which outlined the form of a foot as daintily shaped as a melon seed, and two pearl buckles were their only ornaments.

“Contessina,” said I, “until now I believed that Louis Quinze heels represented the very height of fashion, but you have taught me better. Your little slippers are the pearl gray gloves of your incomparable extremities.”

She stood still, looked at me, with her inimitable look, and said:

“Do you know, Sconer, that you are talking nonsense?”

“Anything is possible, Contessina.” I felt as though I was floating on air.

Maioli’s words came back to mind: that Ghiselda was the trimmest craft that ever sailed the feminine ocean. Was I already being carried out to sea? I was alarmed, and yet at the same time I experienced a joy that gave me double life. Good Heavens! Could this be the bacillus of love of which Dr. Pertusius spoke? “Come to my rescue, Dr. Pertusius! No, let

me die. It is so pleasant to die like this. The universe opens before me through her eyes; her golden hair suffocates me. Calm down, Ginetto Sconer!" Thereupon I said:

"I shall never forget, Contessina, this inaugural day."

"Why, Signor Sconer?"

"Can you ask me that? To be served at table by you! Permit me to note down this memorable date: June 15! It will serve as a counterpoise to another ill-omened date."

"Have we everything on the table now?" she asked me, smiling.

"There is just one thing lacking, and then it will be complete."

"Ah, yes, flowers, we want some flowers."

There were still some lilies in the garden. She picked them, or rather she tried to pick them, but the stems resisted. Hereupon I took my silver penknife from my pocket, opened the blade, and offered it to her.

"But you seem to have everything, Sconer!"

"I have everything, Contessina."

Accordingly, she cut the lilies. She smelled of them and sighed: "Ah! Delicious lilies! Smell of them, Sconer!"

"Yes, delicious; but they have inside of them some annoying yellow stuff, do you see?" And

I brushed off the yellow stuff which had adhered to the tip of my nose, and—"By your leave!"—also to hers.

"Supposing," said I, "that we pick some roses instead." I picked a rose, and smelled of it, but I saw two little beasts crawling out. "Horror!" The Contessina laughed, but I shook the rose, and trod on the two little beasts.

"What have you done, Sconer? You have killed two pretty little beetles."

"But what were they doing inside my roses?"

"They were courting," said the Contessina. "And the rose was their perfumed bridal chamber."

"Fortunate little beetles," said I, sighing.

She took the rose and put it with the lilies in a caraffe which she placed on the table. "Now, all is ready!" said she.

"I am sorry," said I, "but there is still one thing lacking."

"Dear me! What is it?"

She looked, but missed nothing.

"The salt, Contessina."

Hereupon Lisetta arrived with an opulent platter of sliced ham, so rosy, so spiritual, that I marveled at the mysteries of nature that has created such an unclean beast in order to furnish such distinguished food. The Contessina seated herself and ate. How interesting it was to see

her eat! A rosy slice disappeared within a rosy mouth. It seemed as though she was consuming *fondants*.

"Do you know, Sconer, that this ham is delicious?"

"I agree with you." (It must have been an older brother of Madam Caramel's pig.)

"Excuse me, but aren't you afraid that if you eat so much ham you will hurt your digestion?"

"Hurt my digestion, Sconer? How can I? I was never aware that I had such a thing as a digestion."

"But I have." I sighed profoundly. "Well then, Contessina, it is agreed that water is delicious, wine is delicious, the beetles are delicious, the ham is delicious: everything delicious . . ."

"Ah, yes, Sconer: perhaps even death is delicious, but I have never had the sensation; I feel as though I was destined never to die."

"I, too, Contessina. That is to say, I see nothing delicious about death; but what I meant was that I too have the feeling that I am not destined to die. So if we two should become man and wife, we would go on living forever."

"Ha, ha, ha!" She gave way to such a disconcerting burst of laughter that one could see clear down her throat.

“Like Philemon and Baucis.”

I did not know the lady and gentleman in question, but it struck me that she was treating the matter as a jest. Suddenly, however, she became serious and said:

“Good Heavens! What have we been doing, Sconer?”

“We have been having luncheon together, Contessina.”

“But it is compromising!”

“I wish it were, Contessina.”

“But you really are audacious!”

I sighed. She gave way to a second burst of laughter. I was utterly, bewildered. Something extraordinary was about to happen. Had the sun been too much for her? Had the champagne over-excited her? I didn't know. But beyond question the woman was Titanic, overpowering: she was joy triumphant.

Think of living with her, touring the world with her in one continual, delicious tête-à-tête! Sleeping car, Excelsior Hotel, Palace Hotel. In summer, at the North Cape; in the winter, Oriental Express, Egypt, on one of those barges that ascend the Nile, like the one in the picture of Cleopatra.

“What is the matter with you, Sconer?”

“I was dreaming, Contessina.”

The woman was famished. While she laughed

and while I dreamed, she had finished all the ham. What could I give her next? But the platter, emptied of Madam Caramel's ham, reminded me that the same lady also possessed some peaches. She had them all counted—that I knew. But no matter.

"Excuse me a moment, Contessina," said I. I departed and I made a requisition of the peaches: An audacious act, I don't mean by way of theft—for after all it merely paid up for my chocolates which Signorina Oretta had put into that young man's mouth:—but because of the risk I ran of being torn limb from limb by the dog, Leone. However, I came back with the peaches.

At sight of those peaches the Contessina fairly danced with joy. "That's very nice of you Sconer. Do you know, I simply adore peaches!"

I presented them to her.

"Just see how fragrant they are," she said, and held them under my nose! Poor Ginetto!

"With your permission, Sconer?" She took one of the peaches and bit into it; she sank her teeth into the flesh of the peach.

"Contessina," I implored her, "don't do that."

"Does it make you shiver, Sconer?"

"I must confess it does."

"That is like mamma, she can't bear to see me."

"But in my case . . . it's not for the same reason as mamma!"

She stared at me a moment in surprise, with her lips still stained from the peach juice.

"You are very sensitive, Sconer!"

"Very, Contessina."

Something was about to happen that was going to decide my whole life. I, too, like Madam Caramel, like all the rest, was about to enlist. Even if she couldn't distinguish between assets and liabilities, what did it matter? "Maioli, Maioli, you are likely to win the automobile." What was I to do? Throw myself at her feet? Too bad! But that has gone out of fashion.

While I was thinking in this strain I was surprised by hearing her say: "Do you know, Sconer, that I came here once before, last Thursday? They told me that you had gone away."

"I was obliged to go to Genoa on a little business of some precious stones."

"Do you also deal in precious stones?"

"Dear me, yes." I fetched the jewel case and opened it. She plunged in her hand. She exclaimed, scrutinized, and weighed. Then she said:

"Very fine. We also used to have plenty of gems like those."

"These diamond ear-rings," said I, "seem to

me almost worthy of you. I should like to have you try them."

"It is no use; my ears are not pierced. Don't you believe me?"

She bent her head on one side, and with a charming bubbling laugh allowed my hand to raise the incomparable silk of her hair so that I could convince myself that her ear was not pierced. But at the touch of that elastic and tender lobe, I began to tremble.

"Then this ring, Contessina?"

"Oh, yes. I like this emerald in its old-fashioned setting."

"Supposing," I suggested, "that we try it on?" I took her hand. I tried the different fingers, and finally slipped the ring onto her first finger; as I did so I quivered again. Leaning closer, I caught the perfumed warmth of her breath.

She contemplated her hand somewhat thoughtfully.

"Mamma had one like that, only the emerald was a deeper tone. But I no longer care for jewels."

"Neither do I, Contessina, although to-day there are many reasons why it is advisable to invest capital in precious stones. What we might call putting capital to a lyric use! But I confess that I care considerably more for my modest

palazzina in Milan, and for my modest apartment in it." And I proceeded to tell her about my *palazzina* in Milan, my own property; and about my apartment in Louis Quinze style, but with all modern conveniences. "It has everything, practically everything; it only lacks one thing . . ."

She had listened to me thoughtfully. I was waiting to hear the charming question: "What is lacking, dear Sconer?"

And instead, this entirely different inquiry burst forth:

"Do you know what has happened to Cioccolani?"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DISASTER

WHAT the deuce! I had completely forgotten him, and here, in the very midst of this joyous symposium, fell the shadow of Cioccolani.

"Is he ill?"

"Worse than that. A great indignity! You surely remember, Sconer, about Cioccolani's *Attiliad*?"

I felt crushed. I was still to be haunted by Cioccolani and the *Attiliad*, by the *Attiliad* and Cioccolani.

"Well, Signora, what has happened to the *Attiliad*, that is, to Cioccolani?"

"That great drama," said the Contessina, "was destined for open-air production; you remember don't you?"

"Perfectly: the crowds, the Huns, the music."

"We had thought of the theater at Albano, on the Latian hills; but unfortunately the theater at Albano no longer exists. Then we thought of one of the large theaters at Rome, and we wrote to Rome about it. But Rome has not answered."

"It is the same way with the telephone; Rome has a habit of not answering."

"I beg of you not to jest. They have replied, but they raise a difficulty: the name of Ciocolani."

"It isn't much of a name. Sconer is much finer."

"Perhaps you are right. It is terrible! To think that a father has the right to leave to a son who is a genius the inheritance of a vulgar name! But the objection which those gentlemen at Rome had raised is quite different. They say: 'Ciocolani is not a well known name.' He lacks publicity. Do you understand? The important thing seems to be, not to have created the *Hermetic Songs*, not to have created the *Attiliad*. No! But to get publicity! Ah, monstrous!"

"Up to a certain point. But in business, Contessina," I allowed myself to object, "we meet with the same phenomenon. We invent a product; but the most difficult part is to launch it, to familiarize the name! 'Get the name well into the public's head!' It's like trying to drive a nail into a man's head. Often the right name is a matter of luck. Take for example 'Plak's Pills!' Any pharmacist can make them. But Plak's Pills have caught on. Note the name: *Plak!* It sounds like a command. Of course it

sounds like German, so people understand it all the better."

But instead of laughing, the Contessina remained silent.

"Ah yes," she said, "to you commercial people, the *Attiliad* and your drugs and plasters are one and the same thing. Meanwhile the poor boy will die of grief."

"For so small a matter? Let us hope not, Contessina. If the *Attiliad* cannot be produced at Rome, it can be produced at Milan; if not this year, then in the year to come. It is only a question of waiting."

"Waiting? But he can't wait!"

"Excuse me," said I, "but Cioccolani is not a lady in a so-called interesting condition, who cannot wait a day longer."

"But that is precisely the case," said the Contessina, "because if peace should be declared, the *Attiliad* would be ruined."

"Don't worry about that, Contessina. The Italian government prepared for a three months' war; but the English government, which is more practical, prepared for a three years' war."

"You console me, Sconer."

(What do you know about women! This one here, beside the well, wants war; the other one, over yonder under the pergola, wants peace.)

"Contessina," said I, "I really don't understand why Cioccolani can't wait."

She passed her hand helplessly across her brow as if to say: "This man can't understand anything!" And then asked me:

"Do you know history?"

"The history of what?"

"History as recorded in books."

(Dear angel, I wanted to answer, if I had studied history in books I would never have become manager of X—— & Company, Ltd.)

"Why certainly, Contessina," I replied.

"Well, Sconer, for what reason did the Hebrews conquer the promised land?"

"Because," I replied, "they saw a land flowing with beautiful grapes, and the Hebrews were thirsty."

"Bravo! But it took Moses, the man of genius, to tell them: 'Go and possess yourselves of those grapes, because you are the chosen people, and if the Canaanites deny you, you shall slay them!' And why did Alexander conquer Asia? Because he said to the Greeks 'I am God, and all the rest are barbarians.' And why did Napoleon conquer the world? Because he said: '*Liberté Egalité, Fraternité.*' A colossal lie, but no matter! '*Allons, enfants de la Patrie!* forty centuries look down upon you from the top of these pyramids!' And why do

the Germans to-day wish to conquer the world? Because the Kaiser has said, as Moses did, 'You are the salt of the earth! *Deutschland über Alles!*' Take my word for it, Sconer: the world is governed by a formula; every formula, of course, is a lie, and one is as good as another. But that doesn't matter! The essential thing is to catch the imagination of the crowd. A small boy can drive a herd of cattle; a big lie can guide mankind. Do you not know that the public is crazy. That it cannot, will not, must not reason? But that is precisely why it needs the epiphany of a great sublime madman: the man of genius who can magnetize them with the electric current of his words."

I had a sensation approaching vertigo. An educated woman is wonderful, but a great strain.

"Well then, Cioccolani . . ."

(Good Lord! Here is Cioccolani back on the stage again, that everlasting Cioccolani!)

"Well then, Cioccolani is the man of genius who has found the decisive formula: 'Do you want peace? Crush the head of Attila!' Ah, you laugh, Sconer!"

"I laughed, because I was thinking of 'Do you want health? Drink Ferro-China.'"

"But do you realize, Sconer, that if Cioccolani had been born in Germany, instead of be-

ing here to-day begging to have this drama produced, he would be in the Kaiser's following, in the great cohort of poets who sing his glory? You understand now why the *Attiliad* cannot wait a moment longer? That drama has an intrinsic value, but it also has a contingent value: suppose that the war should end through some unforeseen occurrence; Supposing, though God forbid! that the Kaiser be defeated . . ."

"In that case," said I, "Cioccolani's formula would become an actuality, since Attila's head would be crushed."

"And that would be terrible, because Cioccolani's play would be done for. Now at last do you understand?"

"Well, Contessina, Signor Cioccolani could write another one on the same theme: 'Do you want peace? Restore the head of Attila.'"

I felt as though I was swinging through space.

She had such a strange absent look in her eyes that I felt something akin to compassion. The sun had swung around and was hanging above us; there was deep silence throughout the country, and it seemed as if we two had been left alone in the world.

I touched her gently and took her hand, and I said things that I still marvel at myself for having said: "Contessina, listen to me."

“What is it?”

“It is this, Contessina,” I continued in my most insinuating tone. “Instead of thinking of all those tremendous things, of all those exalted men, like Moses and Attila and Napoleon and Cioccolani, have you never thought of a man of a more modest type, but more accessible, more practical . . .”

She looked at me.

“Yes, look at me, look at me, Contessina: look, I mean, at a perfect gentleman, methodical, well-balanced, a faithful companion . . .”

“In short, a husband, to use the accepted term?”

“Precisely.”

“With the usual *ménage*?”

“Precisely. What is more, a very good *ménage*.”

“That,” said she, “is exactly the idea of good Maioli and mamma.”

“It is a good plan to follow mamma’s advice.”

We were silent; then she asked:

“And what next?”

“What next? Why, perhaps we might have a fine baby boy.”

“Who, I?” Her eyes expressed the utmost stupefaction.

“Well, certainly not I,” I replied. “A baby resulting from honest collaboration,” I added.

Her lips were smiling, with a pale little smile that encouraged me.

“What next?”

“Why, then you would have to nurse the baby,” I continued persuasively.

“I nurse a baby?”

“You or the nurse, as you prefer.”

“And then?”

“Why, then the baby will grow up—a fine tall boy.”

“And then?”

“And then he will give his arm to mamma; he will become the greatest comfort of papa and mamma; that is, he will grow up healthy, well conducted, methodical . . .”

I talked on, and she listened docilely, as though fascinated.

“And then?” she asked again.

“And then and then! Why, then life will go on and on.”

“In other words, perpetuate the species?” She stared at me with such amazed eyes, that I seemed to see the white specter of madness pass across them; which prompted me to say to myself: “Ginetto, take heed of what you are doing.” But that day I was prepared for anything.

Yet even I was surprised by this question: “In other words, perpetuate the species?” I

was facing a great battle. I filled the glasses; I drank; so did she.

"Contessina," I said, "I too have heard that marriage is passing through a crisis, that it is now an out-of-date formula. But for all that, what else am I to say? I still believe that a charming wife, intelligent and good, capable of giving and taking advice, wedded to a man who is healthy, well-balanced, intelligent—by Heavens, I still believe that to be a great institution!"

"Then," said she, "I would become the property of a man!"

"And the man, reciprocally, would become yours."

"And I would be the plaything of just one man?"

"That would certainly be the desirable formula. As for plaything," I observed modestly, "It strikes me that the pleasure would be reciprocal."

She did not even smile. "What if I tired of it?" she asked.

She asked this bold question so serenely that I fairly trembled, but did not dare to touch her.

"Ah, Contessina," said I, "what man possessing you would not strive his utmost to keep you from tiring?"

She smiled as though she were listening to

some remote, old-time tale, and said: "Then I should do as other girls do when they are looking for a husband."

Hereupon I plunged into the whirlpool:

"Contessina," said I, "let me make myself clear: under existing circumstances you do not have to search, since you have me!"

"You?"

How tenderly, how lingeringly she uttered that 'you'! Her pupils looked out at me; I felt myself falling into them, as into a deep sea. She was smiling. I don't know why it was, but I too felt a sort of amazement when I realized that her 'you' meant me! I repeated:

"Why not I?"

She continued to look at me.

"I don't understand what there is so strange about it, to make you look at me like that. You find everything beautiful, everything delicious: the water, the flowers, the little beetles. It seems to me that you might find even Ginetto Sconer at least passable. I am a man of my word, and I will make you a *Bassilissa* in good earnest. You have a villa that you call The Cypresses. You care for it because you were born there. We will assume that the windows are broken, the roof caving in, the whole place weighted down with mortgages. Well then, we will clear off the mortgages, we will put in new

windows, we will repair the roof. If instead of one baby, we decide that we want two, we will have two, we will have several. As many as you please: lots of little Counts and Countesses, all dressed in white, playing in the garden of The Cypresses, newly put in order and with lots of flowers; and behind them an English nurse with purple veil. In winter we will stay in Milan, in my apartment, or we will go to the Riviera if the season is good. We will also take some fine trips, if you care for traveling. Doesn't that strike you as a fine program? But you must get rid of Cioccolani and his *Attiliad!*"

I had melted, as can be seen, to the point where I could have been taken up by the spoonful, as they say in Milan. I wanted to be taken up, but instead she said:

"Oh, no!"

She uttered this 'no' so passionately that the spell was broken, and I felt as though some centrifugal force had flung me out of the whirlpool onto dry land. The blood was still pulsing in my head, and at the same time I could hear her voice, almost sobbing as she said:

"Even you, Sconer, are against Cioccolani, like all the others!"

"Do you want to class me with Cioccolani? I could understand some one else, but Cioccolani,

thank you, no! I would not even do you the injustice of believing that you could be in love with that Mordecai!"

"Oh!" she cried, as though I had stung her, "not him, but his genius!"

"Genius, nothing! When it comes to genius, look at me, who have made myself what I am out of nothing."

I was furious; I had faced madness, poverty, literature, and marriage, for her sake. And all to no purpose. I might as well have been telling her a fairy tale; I had not even been honored with a refusal.

I do not smoke except on solemn occasions; but at this moment I lit a cigarette, without even asking permission. I could still hear her voice, monotonous as the whirling of a roulette ball, still harping on Cioccolani; I could hear the words, *Attiliad, genius, triumph, poor boy, every one against the budding genius.*

"Oh, I won't abandon him," I said at length, "if you care so much."

"And we won't give up the production either. You will help us, won't you, Sconer?" It was incredible! The woman's obtuseness reached the point of being unaware that she had mortally offended a man like me.

"How could I help? I am not one of the literary set in Rome or Milan!"

"But aren't you a friend of Lionello?"

"Suppose I am? What has Lionello to do with it?"

"Lionello is a shining light! a successful writer, above all envy, a contributor to the leading magazines and the big dailies. I am sure he would be generous enough to help a brother artist with some enthusiastic articles, such as only he could write, heralding the great and imminent triumph of the *Attiliad*. Don't you think so?"

"Hm-m! I really don't know."

"We had thought of touring Italy, giving readings from the *Attiliad*."

"Excellent idea."

"It is a question of voice . . ."

"I see; he lacks the physique for the rôle."

"Meanwhile, the publication of the *Attiliad* has been definitely decided. We first thought of serializing it in one of the leading magazines, but we finally decided in favor of book form."

"Excellent."

"The publishing house in Milan, however, has sent a pretty high estimate: ten thousand lire."

"They are all commercial people in Milan; and besides, with the high cost of paper . . ."

"His parents don't realize what a son they have. . . ."

"Oh, I think they do. . . ."

"And they have refused to give him the ten thousand lire. . . ."

An interval of silence.

"That is why I came to see you last Thursday."

A second interval of silence.

"Sconer, could you lend us a miserable ten thousand lire?"

"Ten thousand lire, Contessina, are never a miserable ten thousand lire."

"They are in my eyes."

"I won't dispute it; there are widely different opinions about money, which perhaps explains why money so often passes from one pocket into another."

She had come and seated herself beside me on a foot-stool, and stooping over, she began to stroke the cloth of my trousers. Her lips were pouting and her eyes were pleading.

"Please, Contessina, keep those hands quiet!"

"Dear, dear Sconer, do me the favor. Of course the money will be paid back, because the book will have an enormous success."

"What book?"

"The *Attiliad*."

"Oh, yes, the *Attiliad*! I haven't a doubt that faith in success is the first condition of success. But I won't go in for it."

"And why won't you go in for it?"

"Because it is a line of business that I don't

know, and the system of our house is to have nothing to do with any business that we don't know."

"But when I have told you so much about it . . ."

"I don't deny that; but it's no affair of mine."

"Well, then, Sconer, let us treat it strictly as a matter of business. Will you take a note signed by me and Cioccolani?"

"Under no consideration."

"Then on what conditions, Sconer, would you treat it as a business matter?"

"Do you yourself want to make a business matter of it, Contessina?"

"Oh, dear, dear Sconer!"

"Contessina," I repeated, "are you willing to make it a strictly business matter?"

"Certainly."

"Here is the proposition," I began. "You want to bring out your Cioccolani's *Attiliad*."

"Precisely."

"Then follow the example of Esther."

Her eyes opened very wide and stared at me.

"Esther, as you must know since you know so much, when she wished to save Mordecai, made herself more beautiful than ever and presented herself before the terrible King Ahasuerus, and when he saw her looking so beautiful he said: 'Even if you ask me for half my kingdom, I will

give it to you.' You, Contessina, do not need to make yourself more beautiful, and I have no kingdoms to offer you . . . "

I thought that she understood; but not in the sense that I intended. At all events I had begun, so I continued. "You are always saying, 'Overcome, overcome!' It seems to me that we can overcome even this point."

"But I had barely finished when I received for my answer a very painful impression. The Contessina's hand landed violently upon my right cheek. A sound like *clack, clack* resounded though the garden. When I recovered myself, the garden was deserted. I hurried out to the road.

I saw far down the hill the skirt of her *princesse* dress, tossing disdainfully above the little gray slippers. I fancied that I had heard her say: "Beast!"

My pride was wounded. I had made my offer according to traditional standards, and I had been rejected; I had risen above this and had made my offer according to more liberal standards, and had been again rejected and slapped into the bargain!

I cannot understand it all. I made the Contessina an offer which was perhaps rather brutal: but it still remains true that I followed the most scrupulous teachings of feminine psychology:

namely, that a woman has modesty in the presence of the man she loves; but that she has no sense of modesty in the presence of a man whom she does not love.

And instead I have had my face slapped! A slap that really was a slap. Delicious, I grant, but still a slap.

My cheek was bleeding. When Lisetta came she asked "What has happened? Was it the dog, Leone?"

"No, it was a lioness!"

Lisetta applied some court-plaster.

Evidently it was my own ring which had produced that scratch on my cheek. Perhaps I may call it a self-inflicted wound.

I call to mind the fantastic face of Dr. Pertusius who seems to say to me: "Deep waters of sheer madness; but it was sincere. If there had been a treacherous hidden reef, you would have ended, Cavaliere, fast bound upon the rocks of matrimony. Have no regrets, but leave the ring to that fine young woman in proof of your gratitude."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LAST CHAPTER MIGHT AS WELL HAVE
BEEN THE FIRST

THE following day I returned definitely to Milan. I slept in my own bed, a thing that I had not done for some time. Dear, soft, comfortable bed. Such a high-class bed, too!

After so many emotions and disappointments I feared that I should suffer from insomnia. Instead I slept fairly well: which goes to prove that my nerves are sound, and that I am not likely to suffer from neurasthenia. For history records sad cases of madness and suicide resulting from disappointments like mine.

Nevertheless my peaceful slumbers were disturbed in the middle of the night by the vision of an ugly dream.

My bed-room was invaded by German soldiers, with spiked helmets on their heads, and iron-shod boots upon my carpet. "What, are the Germans in Milan?"

They said: "*Herr Ginetto Sconer, kommen Sie mit uns!*"

"Why must I come with you?"

“To be shot. ”

“Heaven forbid! I hope you are only joking.”

“We never joke.”

Now for the first time I felt afraid. Although I have been in Germany several times, and have had the most cordial relations with Germans, I no longer recognized them. They all stood there stiffly in my room, and they all opened their mouths with protruding jaws, that made them resemble Dr. Pertusius's *congenital delinquent*.

“Excuse me, but why am I to be shot? Is it because I have stopped doing business with X—— & Company of Leipzig?”

Nein! It was not for business reasons. It was because I had said that Attila's head must be crushed. “So Attila will crush your head!”

“I'll take your word for it. And to think that before you got such ugly faces, we were all good friends, and you were among the best patrons we had in Milan. But for that matter, it wasn't I, it was the Contessina and Cioccolani who said that the head of Attila should be crushed.”

“In that case we will shoot the Contessina and Cioccolani, too.”

“But they are friends of Germany! And besides, what they said was in poetry. People

say lots of things in Italy, in poetry. Believe me, gentlemen, if you keep up this system of shooting people, you will do some bad business."

Good heavens! They have dragged the coverings off the bed!

I made a desperate effort, and turned on the switch. These ugly visions were banished by a flood of electric light.

I went to sleep again; but towards morning, all in a flash, I thought I saw the Contessina Ghiselda. She was reflected in the mirror that faces my bed. Her golden hair served as a head covering, but for garments she was clad only in her own beauty. She was as sweet and melting as a *fondant*.

Alas, it was not Ghiselda! It was Desdemona opening the window, and a ray of Milan sunshine struck the mirror. A quiver ran through my heart. "Ah, Signora," I exclaimed, "how happy Ginetto Sconer could have made you!"

I looked at my bed and remembered that I must stop in at the furniture dealer and countermand the order for a twin bed. I looked at my parlor and remembered that I was not to install Oretta there, nor Ghiselda either. My poor lovely, deserted chairs and sofas, my poor lovely rugs. Poor Ginetto Sconer, who must remain alone, all alone! A sudden emotion

swept over me that mounted even to my eyes.

But let us think no more about it. I shall console myself by writing my memoirs. They will be useful in case the Revenue Department should put a tax on bachelors, as there is talk of doing; in that case I can at least prove that my intentions were good.

What is more, I will dictate them.

Having come to this conclusion I set out to find a type-writing office, in order to hire a typist, when in the Via Dante, a man stopped and stared at me. So I too stopped and stared at him. Then he proceeded on his way, and I on mine. Presently he turned around and stared again.

Evidently I too must have turned around, otherwise I should not have been aware that he had done so. Thereupon we both walked back and found ourselves face to face.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" I asked.

"That is exactly what I was wondering," he replied. "Who are you?"

At last we recognized each other. He was the pastry shop keeper from P——

"And you," he said, "are the gentleman who . . ."

". . . Who bought so many things at your shop. Alas, yes, I am the one."

"What times these are, Signore, what times

these are!" he exclaimed. "The making of all sweet things is forbidden. Oh, didn't you know? Ours is the only industry that has been sacrificed. Those fine tarts, those beautiful *fondants*, those *sfogliate* that made us famous! And those *marrons glacés*, do you remember?"

"Ah, the *marrons glacés*!"

"What are we going to put in our windows? Dried figs, dried chestnuts, and a few dates. I came to Milan for a supply of Turin caramels. . . ."

This resurrection of the past was too much for me. "Deuce take your caramels! Good-day!" said I.

I left the gentleman standing on the pavement, for it was he who had given me misleading information about the *rosebud* of a daughter. Misleading information, whether in business or diplomacy, may bear incalculable consequences. However, let us not indulge in any more illusions: Roses, nowadays, bud wide open.

The following day my housekeeper, Desdemona, informed me that a young lady was asking to see me.

"Show her into the parlor."

I entered the parlor myself. Where was she? Ah, over there!

It was the typist. She stood resting one

gloved hand on my Bechstein piano. One of the feathers in her little hat pointed down, and the other pointed up like the propellor of an aeroplane. Of her face nothing could be seen but a tip-tilted nose and one eye, because the rest was hidden by the hat. But that one eye was unnaturally large. Without the beacon-light of that eye, I should not have discovered her, because my parlor is large, and she was small. Her thinness was so impressive that it was almost alluring.

I approached her; she exhaled a violent but cheap perfume. I smiled, because I was sure that she had no idea that she was in the presence of X—— & Company, Ltd.

She gave me her name. Her proper place in my series of matrimonial possibilities would be "Signorina Z." But I shall call her "Signorina Boneyard."

We agreed that she should come the following day, and I offered a salary in accordance with her services.

"But are you a rapid typist," I asked.

In a moment she had stripped her arms of their long gloves, and worked her fingers gracefully and rapidly before my eyes. Her arms were like two sticks, but her hands were lovely.

But she continued to stand there; she seemed reluctant to go.

"Excuse me," said I, "but is there something you want to ask me?"

She said yes, there was something she wanted to ask.

"Pray sit down."

She settled herself in the depths of an arm-chair. After some hesitation she asked whether I was a married man or a bachelor.

I was amazed at this indiscreet question.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but a young lady like me has to think of her reputation."

"That is no concern of mine," I responded with dignity. "If you have any misgivings . . ."

She made no answer. She just sat there looking at me and smiling.

"I beg of you," I added, hurriedly, "if you have any misgivings, you don't need to come."

But she still sat there and told me that no, she had no misgivings. But she felt obliged to mention it because . . .

"Because a young lady like you has to think of her reputation; you have told me that once already."

She looked a little disconcerted; she rose and gave me a startled glance, just like a rabbit. Then she said:

"Besides one can see that you are a gentleman."

Unfortunately, yes! I am bewitched. I encounter nothing but Vestal Virgins.

Sunday was our first session. In my Louis Quinze parlor; windows wide open on the garden; I was seated in my English easy chair, in white silk pajamas, when the young lady came in. I had a type-writer brought from the office, with a brand-new ribbon.

I begged her to make herself comfortable. Her eyes widened with admiration as she looked out upon the garden. Now that she had taken off her hat, I could see both her eyes. Her small head was covered with little curls, that were very charming,

“Ah, Signore,” she exclaimed, “that looks like the real country!”

That is the way it is in Milan; the moment they get a glimpse of green, they say they are in the country. Ah, the country! This girl still believes in the virtue of the country! But it is only an illusion.

But that is not the real reason. It is because she is anæmic and ought to be in the country. But how could that be managed? I ask myself. She is a working girl, and has to support herself by her own honest efforts.

“It’s not so easy for a young lady to support herself by her own honest efforts!”

She made no reply to this combined question and exclamation. I pointed to the table where I had the typing machine placed, and began to dictate: "*Cav*—no, write it out in full—*Cavalier Ginetto Sconer . . .*"

She took it down; but all at once she interrupted herself to ask: "Please, may I have a foot-stool? My feet are in mid-air."

I looked and saw that her feet, indeed, did not reach the ground. I rang, and Desdemona appeared. "Desdemona, please bring a foot-stool for the Signorina's lower extremities." (It struck me that Desdemona did not obey with the alacrity that constitutes one of her recommendations.)

Thereupon I continued: *Cavaliere Ginetto Sconer, ruddy complexion, physiognomy diffusing intelligence and courage; sound throughout—hair, teeth, physique.*

Here the Signorina interrupted; she ventured to look directly at me, with that impertinent, tiptilted nose, and then began to laugh. It struck me as rather daring.

What was there to laugh at? "Let us go on, Signorina: *That's me!*"

Another burst of laughter; then she asked, "What, you?"

"Yes, me. Why not? Doesn't the original

correspond with the portrait? However, let us go on."

The *tick-tack* of the machine was resumed; but presently she asked:

"Please, Signore, I am so warm, may I have a glass of water?"

I rang, and asked for a glass of water. Desdemona reappeared with the glass of water, and with a face that was this time even more expressive than before. This gave me something to think of; but the Signorina took no notice. She took the glass from Desdemona's tray and drank. She drank daintily, and she too said: "Delicious!"

This word perturbed me. Ah, sweet melancholy! That day beside the well; everything delicious, the water, the champagne, even death; everything, excepting Ginetto Sconer.

"Let us go on, Signorina."

But a little later she interrupted again, and said in amazement; "Why, this is a novel!"

"Do you think so? These are my memoirs."

"Oh, no, this is a novel. I know something about literature."

"So you too know about literature?"

"Of course, I have studied the technique. Oh, but it's delicious, delicious, delicious!"

"What is?"

"This novel!" And she burst into another

laugh that reminded me of the shrill peals of the Contessina Ghiselda. But as she laughed the foot-stool slid out, she lost her equilibrium, and fell forward into my arms.

“Oh, excuse me, Signore, excuse me!”

I caught her and restored her to equilibrium, but in the course of this operation I was forced to observe that underneath that simple frock there was a solidity and amplitude that one would not have suspected. Really, these stunted flowers growing from the asphalt of Milan, are more solid and tenacious than one would believe at first sight.

I could not well explain how it came about: I had begun by dictating my memoirs, and I ended up with a young woman in my arms.

We postponed the dictation. For that matter it is a well known fact, even in ministerial circles, that type-writing tends to complicate office routine rather than to simplify it.

When she learned that I was director of X—— & Company, Ltd., she was filled with admiration. This compensated me for my outraged feelings at the hands of that stupid Oretta.

I told her my misadventure, and she sympathized with me. “Oh, poor Signore! But those

young women," she said, "simply had no common sense!" That was always the way it struck me, but I would not have dared to say so.

I am amazed: I have wasted so much time looking for some one who would tell me, "I am very fond of you," and there is Signorina Z. repeating to me all the time? "What a dear you are, Ginetto!"

To be sure, Signorina Z. is a substitute; but we live in an age of substitutes; she does not come up to the requirements of my heir; but for a long time we have heard it said that heirs should be abolished. In this case let us think only of our personal happiness.

I have passed several pleasant hours with Signorina Z. She talks charmingly, indulges in no stupid nonsense, she knows the names of the motion picture films and of the "movie" stars; she has her own ideas about fashions and styles, and is enthusiastic over the specialities of my firm. She treats love as a part of the ordinary routine. She has her own sense of decorum, and abundant respectability. I can perfectly well take her with me to any place that I would go myself. Fundamentally she represents a class which is steadily asserting itself more and more: the proletariat—a soft handed, I might even say, intellectual proletariat, but unmistakable just

the same. She will ably play her part in my household.

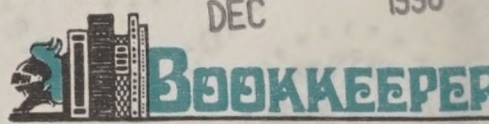
But all this time I have been forgetting: I really must send twenty lire to Dr. Pertusius for his services.

THE END

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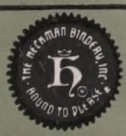
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